

As the Stomach Churns

Craig A. Eddy



Book 3 of
Lords of Terror and Abuse

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by
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Chapter 1

Mired in the Swamp

(Monday morning, a month later)

"Muriel? Where are we at, now?" asked Ted as he walked into her office. He was followed by a gray and white shadow named 'Soul'. Panther looked up, and meeped at her sister.

"Well, sales of cars are falling off, some," Muriel said. "We've got power, water and sewage to every city, town and village, and most rural areas where there's more than one hundred people. We're trying to get those on well water and septic tanks onto our system, using smaller private units. A few hold-outs, there, but I don't think it will be long. Phones are flying off the shelves as fast as they're stocked. People like the idea of not being controlled by a carrier at their expensive rates, and they love having a phone that never needs charging up or replacing. We finally got a foothold in buildings and roads, but you knew about them. The action figures are a hit all over the world. Particularly the one of Anna and her troop that she programmed to actually do Cossack dancing. I feel upstaged," she snickered. "At the cost, kids can have the whole collection in a couple of years. And the proximity to them has turned a number of them into breakthroughs. What else?"

"Iran?"

"Oh, that. They've got a formal government and constitution, and honest judges and police. Ameera is doing a bang-up business in diplomas, and she added primary and secondary schools to the university. The 'faceless ones' are no longer faceless, or in black. And are greeted, wherever they go, with smiling respect. There are still some pockets of Shi'ite Islam in Iran, but they're beginning to fade out. And they've offered aid to other Arab countries – no strings attached."

"So much, so quickly?" asked Ted.

"Oh, it got real easy when Ameera got permission for her squads to arrest the radicals. It tends to put people off to see their leader arrested by a 'faceless one', right in the middle of a hidden meeting. Tends to make them skittish, and feel that maybe their presence is not wanted. When the mass arrests took place, there was a sudden surge of emigration to other countries. I understand that some of those countries weren't particularly sympathetic to the cause of the radicals, and arrested them on the spot, and deported them back to Iran. And justice is swift in Iran. And sharp."

"Ouch. OK, so that's settled down. What about the other Islamic countries?"

"Well," said Muriel, "that's another matter. We haven't been invited in, yet. But the governments are talking to the radicals, and suggesting that either they stop their aggressive action or they WILL call us in. Oh, speaking of action, Melanie has a contract for us to take out some of the drug problems that we've been hearing about. I think the easiest way would

be to interdict the borders. And that includes the tunnels.”

“Can you do that?”

“Why not, Shields don't care, and they can be told what to do. It's going to make a bunch of drug runners look foolish to try to jump the border and end up crashing their vehicle,” Muriel said.

“What about aircraft?”

“Oh, I'm sure that the authorities will be able to spot them by the burned spot on the ground,” Muriel said.

“Ouch. Isn't that a bit extreme?”

“Isn't drug running a bit extreme? And illegal? Why should I shed a tear over what somebody does to themselves?” asked Muriel. “Oh, we won't take out commercial carriers that way. Just tag them and hold all passengers, effects, and cargo until the drugs are found, and the person responsible for them arrested.”

“You know, some of that trafficking doesn't carry drugs,” Ted said.

“True. But the shield can be set to keep out violent people, too. And that means terrorists as well as thugs,” replied Muriel. Out the window, she noticed one of Bob Garcia's squad members escorting a man toward her door. And a glance down at the floor showed both Soul and Panther laying side by side and staring at the door. “I'd say that the man coming isn't really welcome. This should prove interesting. Why don't you take a seat in the casual area, and I'll handle this from my desk.” Ted immediately crossed to a corner seat, where he could see the whole proceeding.

“Muriel White?” asked the man. Mata just pointed to Muriel. Both kittens growled.

“Muriel White?” he asked her.

“Yes. Take a seat.”

“Oh, I won't be here, long. This is to inform you that there is a warrant out for your arrest. The charge is interference with a federal agency in the performance of it's duties,” he said.

“Uh, huh. I don't believe I caught your name. Or your organization,” Muriel said. Ted started snickering.

“Oh, that's unnecessary,” the man said. Then turned to Ted and said, “I don't see what's so funny. This is a very serious action.”

“Of course it is,” Muriel said. “I'm scheduled to be in court tomorrow to testify against a

certain judge that exceeded his authority, violated his oath of office, and conspired to commit fraud. If I don't show up, then the case goes to the defense. And if I DO show up, I'm arrested. Nice setup. Do you have a copy of the warrant?"

"No. I was simply told to inform you of it's existence," he said.

"I see. OK, let's find out if such a warrant actually exists. Melanie," Muriel said and sent, "I've got a Mister Unnecessary here, first name That's. He claims that there's a warrant out for my arrest for interfering with a federal agency in the performance of it's duties, but he doesn't have a copy. Could you track it down for me?"

From the air came Melanie's voice, "Sure, Muriel. Give me a minute. OH! Oh my! Oh, this is priceless. Tell Mister Unnecessary to stay where he is. I'd like to talk to him. And so would some of my friends." By this time, Ted was outright laughing.

"Well, Mister Unnecessary, it looks like you'll be visiting here for a bit. Can I offer you coffee? Tea? Milk? Water? Oh, or soda? Can't be anything stronger, since I'm still underage."

"Um, no. I'll just be leaving, now. I said what I came to say."

"Oh, I insist that you stay. I'm sure that Melanie would like to meet you. She so takes an interest in people that feel that I should be arrested for one reason or another," Muriel said.

"I found it," Melanie said, translating in. "And you'll never guess who signed the warrant."

"The judge that you locked up."

"The judge that . . . wait a minute! How'd you know?" asked Melanie.

"Oh, that was a simple one. Who else would be so interested in my appearance – or lack of appearance? So, what happens now?"

"Quashed. Not all the federal judges are corrupt. And when I explained that the judge that signed the warrant was under arrest on criminal charges, and that this was an attempt to keep you out of court, he said he could believe it. Here's a copy of the quash, and notice has gone out to all police agencies to make sure they understand it's been quashed. Also, a warning that they're not to honor any documents from that judge until further notice," Melanie said.

"Great. So, what do you want done with Mister Unnecessary?" asked Muriel.

"Well, first of all, I want to know who he is. How about it, mister? Got some identification on you?"

"I don't have to show you anything!" he replied.

"Wrong answer," said a voice from the door. "FBI. Let's see some ID, now, or I get it the easy way."

"Why, Henry! Are you taking after me?" asked Muriel, grinning.

"Hey, every once in a while you come up with some good ones. ID mister. Now."

"I don't have to show you anything!" he said. Suddenly, he found himself upright, cuffed, and the contents of his pockets neatly deposited on the desk. "Hey, what is this. You have no right."

"Be still, bub. You don't even begin to know what rights I have," Henry said. "I was willing to do things the hard way. But you just had to go for the easy way. And yes, I'm authorized to come in here and arrest. Bob Garcia, the local chief of police, authorized me, and it was counter signed by the Ambassadors. Me. Not someone else from FBI. Just me and my boss. And actually, this young lady on my right had the authority to do it, too. In case you missed it, she's Melanie Carter, National Security Advisor, and also Secret Service officer. She's got the same piece of paper I've got. If we're invited in, we've got jurisdiction. Hey, Melanie. Look at this! Big fish, this time."

"Hmm. So it is. The missing Link. Link St. George. You know, we missed you when we made the sweep. Out of the country for your health?" asked Melanie.

"I don't have to answer to you," he growled.

"Of course not. Not until you're on the stand," Melanie said. "And you will be. Muriel, honey, this one was personal. It wasn't to keep you from testifying against the judge. It was to keep you from testifying on behalf of the prosecution regarding the behavior of the lawyers. Mister St. George was head of the plaintiff's team in the case about the cell phones, but was, curiously enough, absent when we went to collect him."

"You've got nothing on me!"

"Oh, Mister St. George. That's SO 1940's. And even then, it was only used in the movies. Can't you at least come up with an original line?" asked Melanie. "Or a better Cagney impression?"

"I want my lawyer."

"Oh, you'll get to see him. I think he's in the next cell," she said. "Your man, Henry. And thanks for keeping me from having to do all that paperwork."

"Hmm. I KNEW there was a reason I should have kept my mouth shut," Henry said. But he grinned, and added, "See you next time, Melanie. Try not to have more fun than I do." He translated out with the lawyer, and Melanie laughed.

"You know, Muriel, I'm beginning to reconsider that offer you made, four years ago. I'm beginning to think that we SHOULD have an opening between our offices. Otherwise I might miss out on some of the fun," Ted said, still laughing. "Why is it that every time some goon comes in here to arrest you, you end up having him arrested?"

"Just luck, I guess. Or my clean living," she replied. "But seriously, if you want to open up between our formal offices, no problem. It wouldn't take long, and would just mean a bit of rearranging. Of course, you'd have to put up with the sound of all the teasing that goes on in here."

"There is that. But it would save me from having to make that long walk."

"WHAT long walk. One step and you're in my office," she said.

"Yea, but then I have to walk all the way across it to get to a good seat," he replied. And she laughed.

"Poor Ted. So abused and picked on."

"Hmm. I'm reviewing the situation. I think I'd better think it out again," he said, quoting Fagin in two lines from a musical.

"Yes, you DO look the part of a villain. But I'm no Oliver Twist," Muriel said.

"You're right," replied Ted with a straight face – a dead give-away. "He was prettier." And the stapler became airborne again. And poor Mata, just CAN'T manage to get a drink of that grape and berry mix without inundating her monitor. Even the kittens laughed, in their own way.

"So, what's on for tomorrow?" asked Ted, as Soul jumped up on his lap to comfort him.

"The judge," Muriel said. "We've got a record of the original proceedings in front of the judge trying him, so he can't introduce an edited version. It clearly shows that we were not allowed to present any evidence in our defense, and that the whole trial was weighted toward the phone manufacturer. It also shows that we were refused the right to a jury trial. There are other things that I just don't know about, but the lawyers certainly know the procedures. If we've got a fair judge, then he'll be away for a long time, and may even have to make some sort of restitution. I don't care so much about that, as I do that the action is taken against him showing the other judges that they're next."

"Need me?"

"You're welcome to come, of course. But you're not directly involved or have any first hand knowledge of the original hearing," Muriel said. "So, no, you're not needed, as such. But you're always welcome to come."

"Hmm. I think I may, then. If for no other reason than to pack the court with security

troops. It might get the point across, with that many Envoys in the gallery, that we take this VERY seriously," he said.

"You know? I'm beginning to feel better about this action," Muriel said. "You see, my friends also decided that I needed some support." And Ted began laughing. "I have a feeling that it's going to be a very busy courtroom. Even Fran is coming. And you KNOW how she just LOVES going to court."

"Yep. Around you is definitely the place to be for fun," Ted said. "I hope the judge knows what he's getting into."

"Well, according to Melanie, he was selected exactly because he has no connections to the one we're trying to put away," Muriel said. "Nor does he have any outside financial interests, directly or indirectly. He's also not a conservative or a liberal. He's just a judge. A criminal lawyer, to begin with, that managed to get appointed despite the whipsawing of Congress during the time of troubles. In short, the only one that would even begin to try this case fairly."

Chapter 2

And into the Jungle

(Tuesday morning)

"Is every one here? Alice Wilson?"

"Yes, your honor." ::Muriel, this is not the judge assigned to this case.::

::On it, Alice. Oh, I see. Our judge appears to be unwillingly detained. Marcia?::

"Is your client here?"

"Yes, your honor."

::Working on it, Muriel,:: Marcia sent. ::I've got your image. Fran, standby. He may need medical attention.::

::No problem, Marcia.::

"Well? Where is she?" asked the judge.

"Your honor, my client is Muriel, the Leader of Home and Ambassador to Earth from the People of Home. She is standing on my left."

"All I see is some young girl in an outrageous uniform. I would expect a leader to be at least someone of voting age," the judge said, to snickers from the other table.

"YOU! Get off my bench. Now." A man in judicial robes and with a face covered in blood stalked into the courtroom. Fran immediately went to him, and took care of his injuries. In the mean time, more of Marcia's crew brought in three large men. "I told you to get off my bench, mister. Now, I'm telling you that I will be signing a warrant for your arrest, as co-conspirator to assault and kidnapping."

"You cant do that," said the first judge. "This is my case."

"Nope. It was assigned to me. You aren't even part of this circuit," the second judge said. "Is there an honest cop in here to affect the arrest?"

"Yes, your honor," said Melanie, walking in behind him. "I think I can manage this. Guys. Target. Bench. Cuff and stuff him. Conspiracy to commit assault on a federal judge, conspiracy to kidnap a federal judge. We'll worry about the fine points, later."

"Who the hell do you think you are. You can't arrest me! I'm a federal judge."

"Past tense. I'm Melanie Carter," she said, holding up two identifications. "National

Security Advisor and Secret Service officer. The men currently escorting you are also Secret Service. And if you get out of line, they may get a bit testy. I haven't fed them, yet, this morning. Thanks guys. Your honor," Melanie said, turning to the second judge, "are you all right, now?"

"Now, yes. I don't know who that young lady in the white uniform is, or how she did it, but I'm fine now. And who was the young lady who found me, and how did she get me here?"

"Ah. Questions. Yes, I think you're feeling better. The girl in white is Fran, and she's a doctor. She's one of Muriel's friends. The one that found you is Marcia, another of Muriel's friends. Oh, and she happens to hold identification and authorization from the Secret Service and the FBI. I understand that she's even been awarded the badge of the Navy Seals, as she and six other friends of Muriel passed THEIR course in two weeks. They were awarded an honorary Basic Underwater Demolition/Seal designation. You might say, since that rating in the Seals is abbreviated B-U-D-SLASH-S, that this BUD/S for you," Melanie added with a grin.

"I can see this is going to be a long trial. Even if it only lasts a half hour. OK," he said, proceeding to the bench, "who's the prosecution."

"Alice Wilson, your honor."

"And your client?"

"Muriel, the Leader of Home and Ambassador to Earth from the People of Home. And she's here, your honor."

"I take it that you're indicating the young lady beside you."

"Yes, sir."

"Who are the rest of the people in gray?"

"Muriel's security squads, Ted, Ambassador to America and his squads, and Muriel's friends."

"Uh, huh. Defense?"

"Stefan Hopkins, sir. My client refused to come out of his cell."

"I see. Marcia. Did I get your name right?"

"Yes, your honor."

"I understand from the National Security Advisor that you hold identification and authority to arrest for both the Secret Service and the FBI? Oh, and Navy Seal training? Is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you be so kind as to bring the recalcitrant defendant to this court?"

"Sir! Yes, sir." And she disappeared, to return a moment later with the former judge, standing him beside his attorney. Then returned to her place in the gallery.

"Uh, huh. I see you don't waste any time in accomplishing your duties. Did I hear that there's more of you trained like that?"

"If you mean the basic Envoy training, then yes sir, thousands. If you mean the rescue and recovery training, then only seven of us, sir."

"And you all passed Seal training?"

"Yes, sir. And three of us interned with the Secret Service, and three others and I interned with the FBI."

"Oh, wait a minute. I think I saw you on television. You were the ones that went in and rescued a kidnapped woman, and did the whole thing in about two minutes?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry it took so long, sir."

"I think I'm going to stop asking questions of you. I've begun to feel inadequate. Defense, your client is here, now. Will he enter a plea?"

"Sir, my client wishes to enter a plea of not guilty."

"Uh, huh. I think you might want to advise your client that I've seen a record of the proceedings he held. I've also looked over the attachments to the brief the prosecution submitted, including the financial connections. I've got to say that I think it's extremely unwise of him to enter a plea of not guilty. And that, if he persists in doing so, I will probably be unwilling to show any leniency toward him. Oh, and I've also seen your brief. None of your points constitute an adequate defense. Or any kind of a defense. Was this your doing?"

"No, sir. I was instructed in what to use as a defense, despite my arguments against such things."

"Uh, huh. I'll give you some time to talk to your client. You can take him across the hall to the witness waiting room. A half hour, then I expect him to make a decision. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," and Hopkins lead the former judge out.

"Now, just to keep things pleasant, and not part of the hearing, I'd like to hear more about this rescue and recovery team, if I might."

Marcia stood back up, and started in. "Sir, Muriel and we twelve had been friends for a couple of years, when she began getting Envoy training, and brought us out to Enclave. We ended up trained, too. Then, a year later, my father was killed in the line of duty. He was a cop, and I managed to get the report on what happened. I went over it for about a month trying to figure out what could have been done differently if he'd had the Envoy training. Finally, I got all the courses I could on Criminal justice and law. I also got with Fran, who by that time was a Doctor, and learned how to use the techniques to build up my body. Six other friends found out what I was doing, and joined in. Near the end of it, we hired a couple of Seals to teach us their stuff. We had to compress a lot of it, since they only had two weeks leave. But we passed. Then the internships, which resulted in the television broadcast you saw. At that point, I asked Muriel if we could be the Home Rescue and Recovery team. We're the ones to call in when all non-violent methods have been eliminated."

"You said something about 'sorry about taking so long'. What did you mean?"

"Oh, that operation should only have taken a minute from the time we entered the house to the time we left. One of the troops had a problem finding and removing all the weapons on her designated target. The man had a serious insecurity issue. That's what took us longer, and why there was that pause in the record."

"So, you're apologizing for the operation taking an extra minute because you didn't factor in the possibility of an overarmed assailant?"

"Well, yes, sir. It made us look bad. Or at least not as good as we should have looked." And the judge started chuckling. And that turned into laughter.

Finally, he settled down and said, "Young lady, I've seen perfectionists in my time, but I think you top them all. You have no reason to apologize, or feel ashamed of your actions. That was the slickest recovery I've ever heard of. Just one more question. I understood that Seal training, at least, required weapons proficiency."

"Ah, well, we're too young for guns, sir. But I can make a shield the size of a nine millimeter slug, and put it in the three inch ring at a hundred yards, at the full velocity of a regular bullet. With the added benefit that it's not affected by windage. Each of us went through the shoot house, knocking out 'bad guy' targets as we went, and we beat the best Seal time, because we didn't have to monkey around with anything mechanical. And we never run out of ammunition."

"Well, this has certainly been an eye-opener for me. I never knew you people were that well trained. I'll have to come out, sometime, and talk further. If I'm allowed."

"Any time, your honor. Consider that an invitation to be our guest. We'll even provide transportation, and you'll get to see how we manage to get around so quickly," said Muriel. "And that's not a bribe. We do that for lots of people, just because they want to come but feel reluctant. No reason to. It's an open Embassy."

"Well, I see the defense coming back in. Let's see what he has to say. Mister Hopkins, is your client ready to enter a plea?"

"He is your honor."

"Very well, have him enter it."

"Your honor, on the advice of my attorney, I plead guilty."

"Very good. Plea entered, and sentencing will take place next month. You'll get the exact date when I can get to my calendar. Adjourned until then." He banged the gavel, and Muriel and company translated out en-mass, causing his eyebrows to go up.

"Well, that was interesting," said Muriel as she took her seat in her recliner. A black body immediately made itself available for petting, perched on her legs. Shortly, her sister did the same for Ted. "Humph. Anyone would think you missed me," Muriel said to the kitten.

"You ever notice how you don't own a cat. It owns you?" asked Ted.

"Frequently. Like when she decides my pillow is more comfortable. Especially the spot I've just made warm with my head," Muriel grinned her reply.

"Mine likes to curl up behind my knees, which effectively pins me to the bed," Ted said. Both of the kittens were purring like . . . well . . . like kittens.

"We never found out where they came from." Muriel said. "I guess we've been adopted."

"So, what's next?"

"Alice said that I don't have to show up for the sentencing," Muriel said. "The action against the second judge is strictly and action between judges, so we're not needed there. Unless Marcia or Fran need to appear to give testimony as to how they found him and healed him. So, next up is probably in two weeks, with the company that thought they could railroad us. Alice has asked for a new trial, based on procedural irregularities."

"Irregularities. Now THERE'S an interesting term," Ted said. "Any chance we'll get a fair trial, this time?"

"Oh, yea. Partly, because first up is the criminal charges against the company. In fact, if the stock tanks because of their behavior, we may just buy them, and ask that the previous judgment be set aside," Muriel replied. "They may be popular, but people are going to lose interest in someone that so cooks a trial that it becomes a farce."

"Well, that would solve our problem of having a phone manufacturer," Ted said.

"And computer manufacturer. Same outfit. And lately, they've been suing everyone in

sight in order to keep their monopoly,” Muriel said. “But we’ve already got a manufacturing plant, and trained people to turn out the phones and computers. I don’t know what we’d do with the employees of the other.”

Keep and train the ones that can be trained, and are willing,” Ted said. “Keep the brand going, but done our way. That way, we have some time to figure out what to do with the rest. Of course, the philosophy of the company would have to change. No more 'slap a coat of paint on it and call it new' stuff.”

“Will it work, though,” Muriel asked, thoughtfully.

“Yep. The die-hards will buy the brand. The adventuresome will buy ours, at a much cheaper price, and everybody will be happy. Oh,” Ted added, “and the ones that complained about a 'walled garden' mentality will be overjoyed that there is a way to run the brand name apps, and the ones that buy the brand name will be overjoyed that they can finally get some of the apps that everyone else uses. Win-win situation.”

Chapter 3

A Quiet Sea Interlude

(Wednesday morning)

“Zeb! What are you doing here?” asked Muriel.

“Hello to you, too, Muriel. My ship is in for repairs and restocking, and I thought I'd stop by and say 'hi'. Besides, I'm thinking of retiring. I'm beginning to get people wondering about me being so old and still a captain, and still going to sea,” Zeb said.

“Well, you're certainly welcome, here. Guest House would put you up in a suite of your own, or there are apartments and houses available if you don't want to be waited on,” said Muriel. “Is the rest of your crew here, too?”

“Oh, sure. I think most of them are sacked out. It's been a rough tour, this time. The rest are out wandering around,” he said. “And I'll think about Guest House. I won't be retiring immediately, anyway. I have to give notice, and things like that. My second would be a good one to take over the ship. You've met her. She's good.”

“Yea, I still remember that 'flying tow job',” Muriel said. “Very expertly done.”

“Besides, that way I can come by and bug you, and see how you REALLY manage to do it,” he said.

“Do what? I'm sweet and innocent,” she said.

“Of course you are, Muriel. And I'm only thirty nine.”

“Are you! Seems a bit young for you to retire,” she said. A movement at her door distracted her.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt.”

“Your honor! Come in. What can I do for you?” asked Muriel. “Zeb, this is Judge Wright. Your honor, this is Zeb. He's the captain of a Coast Guard Cutter, and a friend.”

“Well, you can start by calling me Ed. At least outside of the courtroom. I thought I'd come by and learn some more about you and Envoys and Enclave. If you don't mind, that is.”

“Naw. Just ask my mother. I never mind.”

This brought a snort from the judge, and a “You got THAT right,” from Zeb.

“So, what do you want to know?” asked Muriel, giving Zeb a dirty look.

"Well, I found out a lot about how your friend Marcia managed to hoodwink the Secret Service, the FBI, and the Navy Seals, and actually make it stick. But that was just details of her life, rather than information on how she managed to get me out of the closet, so to speak. Or how that other one – Fran? – managed to heal cuts and bruises. And what's with this lawsuit over computers and phones. They're just computers and phones, aren't they?" he asked.

"Um . . . sir? Not to tell you your job, but if we tell you about the phone and computer here, won't that cause you to be biased in the case?" asked Muriel.

"Not necessarily. For instance, I had a case concerning software, and I'd learned some programming growing up. So I learned more about the type of programming that was being discussed in that trial. As a result, I was able to tell when one side or another was trying to pull a fast one on me. In fact, I found that the lawyers arguing the case really knew very little about the programming, and were just throwing arguments out there to see if they would stick. I also discovered that the plaintiff in the case was simply out to shut down the defendant. I'm not fond of such tactics and legal maneuvering in order to promote a particular company over another. So, if you would please," said the judge.

"OK. Well, Envoy techniques are different from anything you've ever learned before," Muriel said, then noticed that the judge was looking at Zeb oddly, and then at Mata. "Sir? Is there a problem?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. I was just noticing that there's a difference between you and the Captain. And a similarity between the Captain and the young lady at the desk, which, if I got the information right, yesterday, is actually an Envoy," he said.

"Ah. Well, I can explain that. First of all, Envoys are soul. You might call it intelligent power. Power that's complex enough to have acquired intelligence and self-awareness. Humans, on the other hand are soul . . . FRAN!" Muriel hollered, and dove for the judge.

"He's OK," Fran said. "He just connected, hard. And deep, it looks like. He should come back in a minute.

"Good grief! I thought he'd had a stroke!"

"Nope. You just triggered him. Here he comes," Fran said, as the judge's eyes rolled back down and his body relaxed.

"WOW! What just happened?" he asked, quietly.

"Your soul and body just connected. When a baby is born its brain isn't developed enough to support the Envoy soul. Originally, it was meant to open up over time, but something went wrong. It's being corrected, now, but that doesn't help all the ones that have already been born," Fran said.

"That's why we're here," Muriel added. "We train people in the Envoy techniques that

part of them already knows about. Oh, we've learned a bunch, too, so it really goes beyond what the Envoy soul knows of its own experience. Lately, though, we've found that explaining some of the differences between humans and Envoys can trigger a direct connection between the soul and body, and make the training more of a refresher course. That's what happened with you, sir."

"Will it make it easier for me to understand about the phone and computer?" he asked.

"Oh, much easier. But first, we should complete the formalities of the training to make sure you're up to date. With your connection, it shouldn't take long. I'll just have to get a male human or Envoy for parts of it," Muriel said.

"Fran?"

"It's all right, Don. He just connected, and it surprised Muriel. He'll be fine."

"Anything I can do to help?" Don asked.

"Well, in a little while he's going to need to go through the catch-up training," Muriel said.

"And I'd still like to know why I think that Zeb looks like that young lady," the judge said, pointing to Mata.

"OK, I'll confess," Zeb said. "It's because I'm actually an Envoy. I and about a third of my crew are. We were trying to do what Ted wanted to do – and Muriel succeeded to do – get the training out to others. But we ended up trapped by the fact that we didn't dare reveal ourselves as Envoys – as aliens. Then we saw Muriel openly doing phenomenal things by human standards, and found out that she was training people. So, we came out and got trained, which made us 'legal' to use the training. Word of warning, though. Don't ever lie to her. She'll take you apart and put you back together again."

"I see. I think I see. Did you ever get the rest of your crew trained?" asked Ed.

"Yep. Did it ourselves. And that was another experience and a half. Plus, we went all over our ship, strengthening it and building in shields, and improved it's performance. And ours. We've done some phenomenal things ourselves, now," Zeb replied.

"So, you know what it's like to try to behave like a human while actually having abilities that would shock people," Ed said, as a statement.

"Yea, kinda. I've never tried to teach that, though. So it might take some questioning to get it all out of me," Zeb said. "Actually, you have an advantage over me, in that you have actually acted like a human"

"Well I should HOPE I acted human," Ed shot back with a grin. "I am."

"And that's the whole point. It's more a case of just realizing when you're about to use your new abilities that people around you might not understand," Zeb said, grinning back. "And as for that young lady at the desk, that's Muriel security chief, Mata."

"What? That little thing?" asked Ed. And Mata stood up. Then stood up again into adult size. Then changed to male and GRINNED at him. "I take it all back. Sorry, Mata. I'll behave, now." Mata switched back.

"It was more comfortable for Muriel, when we met, for me to be the same age and gender as she was. In fact, half her squads did the same. It's become a habit," she said. "But one I've come to like. By the way, there's a room reserved for you at Guest House, and no, you don't have to pay for it. That will give you and whoever trains you a point of privacy."

"I don't even know who's training me, yet!" Ed said. "Zeb, I don't suppose you'd be willing to help, would you? At least in advising me what to look out for in being a human pretending to be human."

"Being a human pretending to be human, huh? I like that. Yea, sure, I'll help as much as I can. That boy over there holding hands with your doctor would be the best for doing the actual training, though," Zeb said, laughing. "He's Muriel's bat boy."

"Bat boy?" asked Ed.

"Oh, you'll find out," Zeb said. "So, let's go get you trained." Don and Fran exchanged a quick kiss, and the three males translated out to the Guest House.

Muriel had a somewhat wistful look on her face as they left. "Patience, Muriel," said Fran. "It's worth the wait."

"You? Teaching ME?"

"Well, somebody's got to," Fran quipped back. "Who ever it is, start with friendship, first. The rest will take care of itself. But if you start with a friend it's easier on the relationship. Oh, and be careful." And Mata's monitor had to be cleaned off, again.

"Oh, now this is really the end," Muriel said. "You, that I had to spend hours comforting, telling me how to live. Next thing you know it'll be total strangers trying to run my life."

"Nope. You already had those," said Mata. "Ted and I, the first day we met. Walked all over the poor abused little girl, deciding what we were going to do with her life, and throwing her to the wolves right off the bat. Actually," she added, "I think we did a pretty good job of running your life. Still do, in fact." And an airborne stapler was stopped by Mata's shield. "We certainly get lots of practice at keeping our shields up," Mata added. And the paperweight joined the stapler.

"You know, Mata," Fran said, "I know what's actually bothering Muriel. She doesn't

have enough to do. Like a spoiled child, she has all these neat toys and doesn't know what to do with them. She has computers to think for her, you and the squads to babysit her and try to distract her, and it isn't enough. She sees her friends going off in their own directions, making their own impact on the world, and she feels left behind. We need to find something to spark her interest in life, to get her to look outside herself more. The poor thing is vegetating. We've been using her as our attack dog, biting whoever oversteps their bounds, but that only happens once in a while. So, the rest of the time she just sits here and mopes about. You've tried strangers running her life. Now, maybe it's time for friends to do the job." Muriel stood up and translated out.

"Where'd she go? Mata?" asked Fran.

A strange look came over Mata's face. "I don't know," she quietly said. "I can't find her. It's like she just dropped out. I can ALWAYS find her, even when she goes to Home! She's blanked me – pulled out of my mind!"

"Oh, no!" Fran said. "I hit her too hard!"

"More a case of you hit her close to home, I think. You just rattled her in a way she wasn't expecting. She's alive . . . that's all I can tell. But it's like she's pulled back from everything," Mata said.

"WHAT'S GOING ON!" Ted bellowed as he came through the door. "Muriel just dropped out on me!"

"Ted, we don't know. We'd been twitting each other . . .," Mata started.

"I think it's my fault," Fran said. "I made some comments about her being a spoiled brat with all these toys and nothing to do. And something about our using her as our attack dog. Suddenly, she stood up and . . . left. Just translated out. And we can't reach her. We don't even know where she is!" By this point, Fran was wailing.

"Doubt," Ted said. "The one weakness she REALLY has. Doubting herself. She has no idea just how valuable she is, and not just to us. She's been our strength for so long that we took it for granted that she'd always be there. Remember how she reacted to those reporters questioning her about what she did in the American Embassy situation? She dropped out then, too. But at least she was here where we could comfort her, and bring her out of it. WHERE IS SHE?"

"Wait!" Mata said. "I'm getting something. Fear. And . . . SNAKE! There's something wrong with the image, though. That's not Muriel. Too low to the ground, and no thoughts behind it. Just fear and the image of the snake, way too close, and ready to strike. PANTHER! I'm seeing what Panther is seeing." She shared the image and feelings with Ted and Fran.

"That's scrub around her. She's somewhere on the back lot," Ted said. "We've go to"

"The snake disappeared. And Panther is . . . she's being lifted up. Now, nothing but gray," Mata said.

"What's going on?" said a familiar, quiet voice as if nothing were wrong. Mata, Ted and Fran immediately swung around and looked at Muriel, sitting in her recliner, holding a very traumatized Panther. "Sorry about blipping out on you. Panther was in trouble, so I went to find her. She was out on the back lot, and had been spotted by a rattle snake. So, I killed the snake and brought her back," she said, gently and slowly stroking the kitten. "She was a very naughty girl to go wandering around where it's dangerous. I think I need to modify the shields to keep her from leaving the office. There's coyotes out there, too. Too many things that would make a meal of her." Panther was shivering, her head buried in Muriel's armpit.

"Muriel," Fran said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have twitted you like that."

"What? Oh that? You're right, you know. I am a spoiled brat, and I do have too much time on my hands. I need to focus more on what I can do," she said. "Or maybe on what I already am doing, but instinctively. I think I'll have to get with Betty, and see what we can work out. OH! You thought I left because of a little twitting? Come on, people. I'm a LITTLE more adult than that. You raised valid points, even if you were just twitting me. But not something that would throw me into a tailspin," she said, quietly, smiling. "Hey, little one. You're safe, now. I've got you. Calm down. Look around, your back in your safe place." And slowly, Panther the kitten looked out, and realized that she wasn't in danger any more. It took a few more minutes, but finally, she was back to nosing into everything, and getting under everyones feet.

Chapter 4

I Live in a Science Fiction World (Wednesday afternoon)

Zeb and Ed came back after lunch, laughing and carrying on. They were joined by Don, who seemed to be the butt of some joke, but was laughing right along with them. And the judge looked sharp, and Muriel noticed the stripes. All five of them.

“OK, you funny guys. What happened,” asked Muriel, trying to sound serious.

“Oh, when Zeb taught me your style of shield, and I've got to admit that it's a beaut, Don popped in to test it, swung his bat, and discovered that I'd left the sticky off. It backlashed at his head, hitting his shield, and caused him to fall over backward, but he caught himself. We've been twitting him about wobbling but not falling down,” said Ed.

“Yea, and then I got him back. When he was making his shoes, I turned them red. He noticed, and clicked his heels and said 'there's no place like home'. And disappeared. Zeb tracked him and pulled him back, both laughing that he'd made his first translation like Dorothy,” Don said.

“I'm just glad my wife wasn't there at the time,” said Ed. “She'd have had a heart attack.”

“We've been trying to find a way to get Zeb, now. But nothing seems to work,” Don said.

“Of course not. I'm a mature and dignified sea captain. Not some brash boy that can be tricked by infantile behavior,” Zeb said.

“My, what big words you use,” Muriel said. “That sounds like a challenge to me.”

“Take my word for it, you'd fail,” Zeb replied. “After all, I've had to captain a ship full of pranksters.”

“Uh, huh. Well, anyway, Ed, let me call Jeff and have him bring over your toys. Oh, and I need to give you your passport, too,” Muriel said. “Zeb, why don't you show him yours, so he'll know what to look for?” she said, sweetly. Zeb pulled it out without looking, and handed it to Ed, who opened it and burst out laughing.

“What's so funny?” asked Zeb, and took it back and looked inside. Behind his picture was the image of his ship braving a high sea, coming out of a fog bank. And beneath the picture was the name Hendrik Van der Decken. Zeb just scowled. Don grabbed the offending document and he, too burst out laughing.

“Never challenge Muriel, Zeb. She'll get you when you aren't looking,” Don said.

"I just wish she hadn't changed my name. The ship in the background is great, though. Much like the stunt we pull on pirates and drug runners," Zeb said. When he got the passport back, he found his own name there, but the picture remained the same. A grim sort of smile crossed his face, and he said, "Thank you, Muriel. That's going to get a laugh from the crew when I go back."

Ed Wright looked in his 'no pocket' and found his own passport. When he looked inside, he went and sat down. "This really brings it home, in a sense," he said.

"The young woman that came to take away the judge that had tried to replace you? That was her father that you met in Home," Zeb said. "He died when she was ten – killed in action. She did him one or two better. First a Marine grunt, then an officer, then Secret Service. And now National Security Adviser and Envoy trained. So he waits for her and keeps active by helping those that go to Judgment Square because of their death."

"And that brings it Home with a capital 'H'," Ed said.

"Well, enough of that. It's time to show you your new toys," Muriel said. Jeff came in and handed Ed a case with a laptop in it.

"Set it on the floor, on edge, and tell it to stay," Jeff said.

"What? Oh, gad. I feel foolish doing this but" He set it down and said, "Stay."

"Muriel, pick it up," said Jeff. Muriel reached for the straps, and they seemed to elude her. So she physically grabbed the case and tried to lift it.

"You're kidding! What did you do?" she asked.

"Theft proof. The only one that can pick it up, now, is the Judge," said Jeff. "Go ahead, sir." Ed reached for it, and the straps jumped into his hand. He lifted, and it came away, easily. "By the way, that one little trick has keyed the machine to you. You're the only one that can use it, unless you give someone else permission. And you'd have to give them permission EACH TIME you wanted them to use it. No blanket permissions. Now, take it out, and I'll show you how it works."

"This, and the phone," Jeff said, going into teaching mode, "are made of nothing but semi-intelligent shields, and eager as a puppy, but with better obedience. Oh, and it's always on. It CAN'T run out of power, because there's no battery and no plug. There are ports for various earth-bound devices like USB connections and earphone jacks, and such. But those are mostly cosmetic, as you'll learn in a minute. This computer will do anything you want except cook dinner. It can retrieve data from any computer or phone that you have. It can run any program that you have or want, regardless of the underlying operating system, and will sort out what is needed to run it. It has no operating system, but works directly with the program you call up. Of course, if the programs are commercial, you have to have a commercial license for them, or purchase them, but that's about the only restriction."

“Now, do you normally leave your computer running in your office?” asked Jeff.

“No. Too many people might wander in and want to see what I was working on,” Ed said.

“Good, then this will be a good demonstration of what this computer can do. Tell the computer to go get your web browser and profile, and your email reader and profile, and your data files. Oh, and what office productivity suite do you use?” The judge named it. “Good. No problem. Since Home owns the company, and I was named president of it, giving you a copy of it won't cost either of us a cent. Watch this,” he said. “Computer, master override, permission Jeff, install the office suite from my software company.” The machine flashed a couple of times, and an icon appeared on the blank background. “Now, you do the same for your browser and email.” The judge did, and shortly two more icons appeared on the desktop.

“For security, this computer cannot be invaded from outside, and cannot 'catch' a virus or other malware. In fact, malware that gets to the computer will cause the computer to track back to where it came from, and smoke the machine. The effect looks much like a lightning strike on an electric line, causing about a thousand volts at one amp to surge through the offending computer. The same happens to crackers – those people that try to break into other people's computers. It tends to dissuade the nasties from going after your information.”

“Security trick number two. Why don't you bring up the browser and go to a website. You don't have to use your fingers, just tell it with your mind what you want to see.” The judge did, and shortly he was looking at a web encyclopedia. “No, that's not a wireless network. Too insecure. It just went out and got the information. Same with your emails, though there, you have to have an ISP to host the server. So it will connect to the server. Give it your email address and the password mentally, once, and you'll never have to give it again for that program and ISP. I'll let you do that where you have some privacy, since I'm sure you don't want others to see what emails you get. Now, if there's a commercial program you need, let me know, and we'll get it for you. You're a trainee now – someone trained in Envoy techniques. That means that you don't pay for anything here. And since I'm here, that means you get the programs for free. We can get them for you if we don't already have them, and make sure they're installed in accordance with the manufacturer's policies. Things like program keys and stuff like that.”

“If you run into any trouble or have any questions, just contact me, mentally, or stop by my office. Either I'll sort it out, or one of my squad will do it. They're all Envoys, and know what I know. And they enjoy being helpful, so don't feel that you're imposing. You're not. It's your right as an owner of one of our computers. Oh, and I do mean ANYTIME. We believe in full service and support.”

“Now, for the fun. You've got a phone. Don't even bother to open it up,” Jeff said, taking a new phone out of a 'no pocket'. “Tell your new phone what your phone number is, then tell it you want all your data and information from the other phone.” The judge did, and watched the phone go through some of the most amazing antics at a speed that was

unbelievable. Suddenly, it stopped, and offered a plain screen with the date and time listed on it. The old phone was now dead. Inert. “And that’s it. You’re now signed up with the Enclave phone company, with your old number. You have all your contacts and information. And, from now on you never have to dial a number, search for a contact, or share even one side of the conversation with other people unless you want to. You can do the whole conversation in your mind. Plus, the phone will automatically connect to your computer and project to your mind whatever information you want. In fact, the phone is a computer, itself, that’s as powerful as that laptop. It just has a smaller screen. And the laptop has the computing power of a super computer, and a storage capacity that is, for all intents and purposes, unlimited. I suggest that you play with the two of them for a while to get used to them.”

“Wow! This is unreal. I feel like I’m living in a Science Fiction world,” Ed said.

“Oh, one other thing. It can’t be stolen from you. For one thing, it wouldn’t do anyone any good to steal it, since it will ONLY respond to you, with the same provision as the computer. But there’s a second reason. And to show you – Muriel would you help me?” Jeff asked, and handed her a set of handcuffs. When he turned his back to her, she put them on his wrists. “Now watch closely and you’ll understand. You know what a ‘no pocket’ is. This is an application of it.” And he reached one hand into a ‘no pocket’ behind his back, and pulled out the handcuffs as they disappeared from his wrists.”

“Oh, my gosh! If I lose it, all I have to do is pull it out of a ‘no pocket’?”

“That’s right, your honor.”

“Ed. Please. Unless we’re in court, I’m Ed.”

“Glad to know you, Ed. And, I don’t know if you got it, but that means you can’t be tied up or handcuffed against your will. You can remove restraints simply by pulling them out of a ‘no pocket’,” Jeff said. “Couple that with your shield, and you can’t be beaten up, robbed, shot, or anything else. The down side is that you can’t be corrupted or allow yourself to be corrupted, because you have to watch the balance inside you.”

“I can live with that. That really isn’t a restriction to me. Wait a minute! I just realized what you were saying! I could put my law books on the computer, and use the phone to search for particular cases, even if I’m in court,” Ed said.

“True. But I don’t know if anyone has compiled them in electronic form,” Jeff said. “However, maybe you don’t have to go to that much trouble. Do you have a past case in mind?”

“Well, actually, yes. But all I want to see is a part of it.”

“OK, tell your phone to make a search for that case, and that part. If you can’t be specific about the part, give it what you know of it or what the part is about,” Jeff said. Ed got a strange look on his face for a moment, then his eyebrows shot up, and he looked like he

was looking between two things.

“Why that damn, subtle liar,” he said. “He mis-quoted the case in such a way that I would have believed what he was trying to argue. And I might not have caught it, because I might not have known where to look in the case. Jeff, you just saved me a BUNCH of trouble doing my job. In fact, I think I'd be able to do this right in court, during oral arguments. This is going to make me a better judge than ever. THANK you!”

“You're welcome, sir. But, really, it's you. I just supply the tools. You're the one that realized the potential for using them,” Jeff said.

“Uh, huh. How would you like to spend ten days in jail for lying to a judge?”

“How would you hold me?” Jeff grinned back. “And realize that this is an Embassy, and I'm an Ambassador.”

“Ouch. You fight dirty,” Ed said with a grin.

“Yea, well, I had a good teacher,” Jeff replied, grinning at Muriel.

“Is that legal?” asked Ed. “This is a country that values the law.

“Ah, but here you're outside American law,” said Jeff. “This is Home property, bought and paid for. And the Treaty with America makes the whole property an Embassy. All I have to do is get here, and request sanctuary, and you can't touch me . . . BY YOUR OWN LAWS. And how do you hold someone that can translate out of any cell?”

The judge's eyes flicked back and forth a bit, and he said, “DAMN! You're right. That's nasty. And I KNOW it's been tested. The phone brought up cases backing it up.”

“You know, you don't have to move your eyes to read what's in your mind. Tell the line to scan at your reading speed. That way, you can be staring at the offending lawyer while you access the information, and just throw it at him,” Jeff said. “It might take a bit of practice to do it, but it works.”

“Are you sure you're just a sixteen year old kid?”

“According to my parents and my birth certificate,” Jeff laughed. “I've just learned to think so far outside the box that I can't even SEE the box. Muriel does the same thing, you know.”

“Oh, and something I don't know if they told you,” Muriel said. “We have various courses you can take – PhD level degree courses – and if you pass them directly to your soul they'll immediately open up and be usable. Like something you learned long ago, but crisp and sharp. Not like faded memories.”

“Can I ask you a strange question?” Ed asked.

"You can ask. You might get a strange answer," said Muriel

"You've got degrees?"

"Oh, yes," Muriel replied.

"What in?"

"Oh, my," Muriel blushed. "OK, now my secret's out. These are all PhDs, by the way. Business management, business administration – they're different, if you didn't know. Accounting and finance, federal law – I didn't bother with the local stuff, since I mostly have to deal with the federal government. Oh, and tactics and strategy of warfare – Ted saddled me with that ridiculous Marshal of the Forces of Home title. Religions, Polysci"

"HOLY CRAP!" Jeff said. "She's got more that I have. And she said that I was overdoing it."

"International relations and diplomacy – which is simply a way of distracting an opponent while you look for a bigger stick." This brought a chuckle out of the judge. "Oh, and art and sculpture. I think that's it," Muriel said.

"Muriel," asked Jeff, "do you ever take time to breath? That's ten degrees!"

"Frequently. It's a habit, I'll admit. And maybe I should break it. But it's so much FUN!" And that had them ALL laughing. "Now, I suppose you're going to want me to put the paperwork up on my wall."

"I wouldn't dream of asking you to," Jeff said.

"Good. I don't HAVE enough wall!"

"Those sculptures up above your head. You did them?" asked Ed.

"Yep."

"That first one. I know the one on the right is you. But who's the little girl on the left?"

"Me. It's me as I was at twelve, just after getting trained, looking at the near future me, who's looking back at the past. And they're both walking into the distant future. It was just a student project," Muriel said.

"THAT was a STUDENT project?"

"Yep. First thing I ever did. A real artist went and up-sized it to life size, and added textures that I hadn't thought of. He's got the original in the art gallery on the main street," Muriel said. "I was told by one of my Envoys to work from something I knew, at first. Well, I

knew me. And I knew about how I viewed life. So, at twelve I was looking at the future – at least in a generalized sense – to see where I wanted to go. And the me, now, looks back at the past to be sure I'm still on the track for what I wanted to do. That's why I show them hand in hand. But both of us are walking into the real future. Does that make sense?"

"Yes. It does. A great deal of sense. And the symbolism is all there, I was just too dense to see it," said Ed. "That's a remarkable piece. I'll have to look up that gallery and see if they do any miniatures."

"No need," Muriel said, pulling out a box and handing it to him. "And no, we don't take payment. Guests, employees and trainees all get anything made in Home or Enclave free. Visitors have to pay, but not much. It took the first three courses I took to understand why, though." The judge opened the box, and there was the slightly refined sculpture – slightly refined meaning that the textures were added, and some wrinkles in the uniforms rounded a bit more. But the sparkle was still in the eyes, and the grin still on the faces.

Chapter 5

Initial Hearing on Copyrights and Patents

(Monday, two weeks later)

“OK, what just happened,” asked Ted. “I know I got the gist of the final – no trial because the company couldn't prove that we had copied anything. They tried to claim that we copied their programs, but we showed that we had receipts for every one of them. They tried to say that we copied their operating system, but we showed that we didn't have an operating system under the current definition of the term. Then they tried on look and feel, and were shot down with prior art. But WHAT HAPPENED!”

“Oh, Alice explained what I didn't catch as it went along. The defense tried to make Judge Wright recuse himself because he'd been to Enclave. He tossed back the fact that he'd also visited the computer and phone manufacturing plants, and talked to engineers and programmers,” Muriel said. “So, that argument didn't fly.”

“Then they tried to say that he'd received a computer and a phone from us, obviously bribing him. Judge Wright calmly explained Guest Rights to the lawyer, and added that the company he represented had had an equal opportunity to offer examples of their products. That, in fact, they treated his visit as an imposition. He also asked how the lawyer or the company were sure that he had received anything from us. And that's where it got sticky for the lawyer. He couldn't admit that they had illegal surveillance on him, or that they'd lost a computer by trying to crack his. And he DID bring that up, including the logs from his computer showing that it was, in fact, one of the company's computers that tried to break into his. Date, time, IP address, MAC address of the computer, physical location of the computer including the operator that was logged in at the time. He offered to press charges against them for attempting an unauthorized entry into his computer. The lawyer decided to drop that issue.”

“Then the judge struck, and struck hard. The defense – we'd turned the lawsuit around on them so that we were prosecuting them for defamation of character – the defense had tried to use a particular case to bolster their claim of copyright violations against us. Remember when he was in here? Or, maybe you weren't in my office at the time. Anyway, when Jeff instructed him on how to use the phone, he'd tried looking up case law. One particular part of one particular case. The phone found it, and gave it to him, and he made some comment about the lawyer being a liar. Well, the judge asked him about the case, and the lawyer was adamant that it proved that we'd copied their precious Intellectual Property. And he nailed the man to the wall, and suggested that he could report the lawyer to the bar association for disbarment. And would, if the man continued to misquote cases or law. By the way, that one also covered look and feel.”

“Well, at that point, Alice requested a summary judgment against the company, with the provision that the associated copyrights and patents be declared null and void due to prior art and obviousness – things that Alice had presented in the documentation and evidence submitted to the court and to the company as required in a trial. The company's lawyer tried

to object that it needed to go to trial to prove that. The judge responded that the company had only provided their copyright information, and nothing to support it. Whereas we had refuted their copyright claims and backed it up with hard evidence. And that the claims of the company were on extremely shaky ground due to the fact that the lawyer had misquoted a case to try to MAKE the copyright claims look valid. So Judge Wright denied the objection, and found in our favor. And Mata leaked the whole thing to the media AND Wall Street, and the company's stock went through the cellar – to the point where people would almost have to pay US to take it.”

“We now own the company. In fact, the board meeting is this afternoon, and I'm going. Along with all the stock numbers and proxy numbers,” Muriel concluded. “Now does it make sense?”

“But, what about all the other lawsuits they've got all over the world?” Ted asked.

“Dropped. Oh, we may have to smooth the way, financially, some. But I think we can work that out. Particularly if we declare the patents void and the copyrighted material to be public domain. We might even offer to help other companies to understand and use some of them, if they ask,” Muriel said. “Hey, it worked for our software company. We made more money by charging less than the original owners had. And without the lawsuits.”

“Can I ask . . . why do you want this company so badly?” asked Ted.

“Oh, that's simple. They used to be a good, if somewhat limited in scope, computer company. Then they decided to become a monopoly, even though their numbers weren't high enough to qualify. So, to augment their numbers by the attrition of other companies, they became a patent and copyright troll. In other words, another form of bully. And you KNOW just how much I LOVE BULLIES,” Muriel said, with disgust. “To my mind, the only good bully is a dead one.”

“And Alice told you all that stuff about what went on in court?”

Muriel sighed, and suddenly there were a bunch of framed documents on her wall. “Take your pick. No, she didn't tell me all of it. She just told me the parts that I missed, which weren't very many.” And she pointed to the wall.

“What the . . . ! When did you get all those?” asked Ted.

“Over the course of a long and eventful four years of having to try to understand just what the bullies were going to do, next,” Muriel replied. “I won't say it's been fun. But it's kept me from being distracted by some of their antics. How do you THINK I figured out where to look for some of the initiators of the attacks. It's been a running gag between Mata and I over which politician had been bought for what attack. I think I'm going to have to pay Congress another visit. What IS it about these people, that they think they can just make any law they want, and screw the people that actually put them in office.”

“Well, a lot of people operate under the conservative principle of 'if it works, don't

change it'. And money has always worked for them, so they keep taking it and promoting ridiculous laws," Ted said.

"What you're saying is that they believe 'if it's broke, don't fix it'," Muriel said. "Almost makes me want to run for office on a Teddy Roosevelt platform."

"A WHAT?"

"An 'I've got a bigger stick, and I'm going to beat the bloody hell out of you if you don't back down' platform. And why not? I already talk softly," she said, and Ted started laughing. "It ain't funny, Ted. The only thing holding me back from running for President is my age. I'm not thirty five. Those chauvinistic, bigoted politicians are under the delusion that age confers wisdom. All age confers is wrinkles. Hmm. Do you suppose I could get away with listing the age of my soul?" And Ted laughed harder. "Naw, wouldn't work. They'd want me to die before I started politicking." And that did it. Ted was in a fetal position in the chair, trying to hold his stomach. "Bah! You're no help. Try to have an intelligent conversation with a man, and all you get is laughed at. Gather the troops, Mata. I'm going hunting."

Mata just grinned, and a few minutes later they were in the board room of the computer company that thought it could take a bigger bite of the apple. Over the years, Muriel had created an easy way to eliminate argument when she took over a company. Behind her, high enough and large enough for everyone to see, were the names of those that held voting stock in the company, and the quantity of stock they held, totaled at the bottom. On the left were the board members. On the right was Muriel. Case closed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's over. You're owned. And you're fired. You have until four o'clock to cash in your stock. Tomorrow morning it's wastepaper. Squads, escort them off the property, and check their vehicles for any company documents. I don't care about products they might be pilfering, since that's all going to change, shortly, anyway," Muriel said. "Then get the company lawyers in here, so I can see what legal damage they've been up to and cauterize it."

"You can't do this!" one of them shouted.

"Wrong tense. I can, and I did. This company is now the property of Home, and will be run under the principles and rules of Home," Muriel said. "This used to be a quality company. It will be, again. But without the dirty tricks and legal crap. It's future will be made or broken on the quality of it's goods, not it's greed. Squads, get them out of here. I'm tired of looking at shit-for-brains." And she turned her back on them.

When they were gone, she turned to Mata and told her to shut down the factories and send the workers home with two weeks pay. Mata didn't really need that instruction, other than as an indication to start a process that would end the way the company worked. Workers were sent home, suppliers were notified that their services were no longer needed, and that if they wanted any of the stock they'd supplied back, they could have it. Completed or nearly completed products were finished up and sent out, and the price dropped to half of it's original cost.

The lawyers were brought in and forced to disclose all legal action being taken against other companies. They weren't happy. Bad news like Muriel travels fast. And she'd pulled this stunt often enough for the word to get around. They knew what it meant. They'd have to go to work for a living. A couple of them actually tried to say that they were under contract to the company. Muriel pointed out that they were under contract to the company that had just been bought out and no longer existed in its previous form. And that if they wanted a contract with Home, the new owner, it would have to be negotiated and would depend on their abilities. They got the point.

"Anything left for me to do, Mata?"

"Nope. Management has been fired, outright. Two weeks severance, and out the door. Envoys are in all top management positions. Gates are locked, and OUR security is in force in all locations. You can go home now," Mata said.

"What about you and the squads?"

"We'll be following soon. The squads are gathering records and names. They ran a complex structure, so that it would be difficult to track who got what money. We'll turn the information to Legal, and let them start disgorgement proceedings," Mata said. "You did good. It's not even three o'clock, yet."

"Isn't there something I can do to help?"

"Not really," said Mata. "They're clearing it out to the warehouse prison. Again. Then we'll be gone, too. Go. Believe me, I know how you feel – dirty, like you stepped in something up to your neck."

"How do you deal with it?"

"Oh, that's simple. Envoy. No body. So, I just create a new one, like you create a new uniform," Mata said, and grinned. "It's also how I do minute aging, so I catch up with you. Seriously, go. We'll be fine, and we know how to holler for you if we need you."

"Yes, mother," Muriel said, and translated to her apartment. A few minutes later, she was back in her office, feeling much better, and MUCH cleaner. Contacting Alice, she found out that motions to stop all the litigations had already gone out, and the paperwork naming Home as the new owner of the company were ready to be signed. And Alice was in her office with them before she could translate over to Legal. Ted came in to counter-sign them, as her witness, then stood looking up at her 'wall of shame'.

"Ten degrees. Good choices, all of them. And, I take it that you use them as an overview and to help you define terms, rather than relying on them for your actions," he said.

"Yep. 'I've got people for that'," she quipped. "Seriously, I think things like today are when I rely on them the most. Knowing some of the legal terms and maneuvering. A lot of

the shenanigans that businesses are allowed to pull. It isn't so much the information in the degrees that I use as the spaces between the information -- the loopholes in the law and business practices."

"THAT'S how you do it!" Ted exclaimed. "I never thought of looking at the information like that."

"Yea, it's a 'what can I get away with' mentality. It's what I lacked that time I got bogged down with that software company four years ago," Muriel said. "These are actually slightly modified versions of the original courses. Once you got me straightened out about the fact that I just didn't have the knowledge -- the training -- to go into the records like I was trying to, I asked Betty to help me. She realized that the information was there, in the courses, but needed pointers to where the gaps were. Took her two weeks to tweak them, then she started dumping. I got the two business courses and the accounting course in one day. Federal law came about a week later, I think. The rest, except for the art course, I got when we had the China blowup. That's how I knew that the Chinese delegates were trying to scam us. And it made dealing with Sergei simple. The art course was because I was missing something from what Frank had passed me, but couldn't put my finger on it. It was right after getting that course that I made my first sculpture. Then Steve gave me a master-class on art when he took that, blew it up to full size, and added the textures. THAT was an eyeopener for me. So, yea, each of the courses have their purpose in letting me see how others view their disciplines, but don't hog-tie me."

"That isn't all the courses you took," Betty said from the doorway. "You forgot religions, philosophy, cosmology -- that philosophy spin-off, and ethics." And four more certificates appeared on the wall. "Hmm. It's lopsided."

"What? What is?"

"The wall. You've got two rows of five, and one with only four in it. You need another course," said Betty.

"You've GOT to be kidding. What else could I possibly need?" asked Muriel.

"Humor," Betty said, dryly, and ducked. And Ted started laughing. Again. "Actually, that isn't as far fetched as you think. What you do is built on instinct and what met the needs of the time. Even some of your outrageous stuff is really right out of what constitutes humor. That might be just what you need to see why and how it works."

"Or, maybe not," said Muriel. "It might just give me centipede-itus, and I'd never be funny again. I'll think about it. Besides, Samuel Clemens wrote a whole lot on the nature of humor. 'The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow', for example. But so much of his stuff contradicts itself that it doesn't make any sense. Unless you look between the lines and realize that he was disguising what he did so that others wouldn't realize that he was using humor in MANY ways. And then, there's clowning, which is parody or satire on the human condition."

"All right, young lady," said Betty, sternly. "YOU write the course!" And Ted laughed, again.

"And you just epitomized my thesis," Muriel said. "Humor shows many things. It can show opposites as contrast, like you're being humorous by being stern. It can be ridiculous, like my walking on air after being introduced as the 'Outrageous Ambassador'. It can be pratfalls, like my throwing things at Ted or Mata after they pull a particularly good zinger. It can be stoppers, like what Fred pulled on me with the hob-nailed boots image."

"Keep going. I'm taking all this down," Betty said. "I never really understood it, even when I laughed at things. How did YOU know about it?"

"I started with Samuel Clemens – Mark Twain. Heck, there's even an award that the Kennedy Center gives out for American humor," Muriel said. "I just do it for fun. The stuff I do isn't meant to be serious, like some comedians do. It's just meant to lighten up a serious situation. Taylor is the same, in his own way. So is Anna. The height of ridiculous is a twelve year old girl dressed as an adult male, dancing and riding WITHOUT using Envoy techniques to accomplish it. She turns dance and riding into joy. Really GOOD humor takes a LOT of work."

"So," Ted said, "when you're being funny, you're actually being serious?"

"Yes and no" Muriel said.

"**AAAAAAARRRRRRRGGGGGGHH!**" hollered Ted. And Betty laughed.

"I don't TRY to be humorous – or funny, if you will," Muriel said. "I just do it. But there's a serious side to it. A serious reason for me to make the break, throw the stopper, or lighten the mood. AND, I have fun doing it."

"Can it be taught?" asked Betty.

"No, but it can be learned," Muriel replied. "It's much like that line from a movie, years ago – 'Do. Or do not. There is no try'. And that's it, really. The harder you try, the more likely you are to flop. It's a mindset. A warped way of looking at life and realizing the opposites, contrasts, or what ever it takes to shift people's thinking."

"And to think that I always thought your soul was just being light-minded. That it never took anything seriously. And yet, he pulled the most outrageous act he could have, and did it in seriousness. I owe Az an apology. He was crazy sane," Ted said.

"Yea," Muriel replied. "There was method to his madness. And to mine, come to that. There are things that need to be said, that can't be said seriously without hurting someone. But they can be said with humor, and the point still gets across. Look, I've got to go over to Triple E, and let Frederica know what sort of nonsense I've been up to, now." And she translated out, leaving Ted and Betty looking at the hole in the air with a new respect for the 'little girl' that managed to do so much.

Chapter 6

Ever Feel Useless?

(Monday, late afternoon)

“What ARE you doing?” Muriel asked Susan, as she walked up to the reception desk at Triple E.

“Trying to get a clean copy of this letter typed up. Thank goodness for spell checkers. I just hope I'm using the right words,” she replied. “It's why I never tried for a secretarial position.”

“Oh?”

“Yea. I tell people that I type forty mistakes a minute, with words.” Muriel snickered at Susan's statement. “It's as fast as I could manage to get in typing class. But my spelling is for the birds.”

“Have you asked Betty for the secretarial course?” asked Muriel.

“No. I didn't know there was one,” Susan replied.

“It's actually an administrative assistant course, but it includes all the basics, like typing and such. Actually, Jeff used it as the basis for part of the computer he invented. You just think of what you want, and the computer automatically puts it in the proper form and takes care of the spelling, for the most part. Don't you have one of the new computers?”

“I don't think so. No, I'm pretty sure this is the same one that I got when I came here,” Susan said.

“OK. I've got to talk to Frederica, if she isn't busy. I'll suggest that she get ahold of the company that makes them – it's one of ours – and get you set up. Is she free?”

“No,” said a voice beside Muriel, “she charges for it.”

“Goof!”

“Yea, but after that talk you gave Ted and Betty, I'm beginning to understand how you do it,” Frederica said. “I hope you don't mind.”

“Oh, heck no!,” Muriel said. “The world needs a little more humor. What I came over for was to tell you that we own that computer and phone company, now,”

“Yes. I know. Alice told me. So did Jeff and Mata. Oh, and I think Ted told us, too.”

“Sheesh! A girl just can't keep ANY secrets around here.” Muriel said, and Susan

laughed.

“Seriously, we're all set, and already have the financials and such. The Envoy management is in place, and Envoy factory workers will be in by tomorrow morning. Expect a delay of a couple of days before they start actually producing, though. There's a lot to clear out of there,” Frederica said. “The financials are . . . um . . . interesting. We're passing as much as we find to Alice, and she's trying to figure out what we can claw back. Some of those people were making more in bonuses than they were in salary. And we're already reaching out to competitors, and letting them know that the war is over, and we'll play nice.”

“Ever feel useless?” Muriel asked, grinning. “Seriously, it sounds like you've got it covered. Thank you.”

“My job,” Frederica said. “It's what I'm here for.”

“No. It's more than your job. You're anticipating what I need, and I appreciate it. It takes a whole lot off of me, having you at my back,” Muriel said.

“Oh, well . . . thanks. Anything else I can do for you?”

“Oh! Yes. Computers. Ask Jeff, or actually his computer company, for the new ones that do everything but cook breakfast for you. That, and phones. They're really something, and can take a lot of the drudgery out of the work,” Muriel said.

“Really? But we have a lot of stuff on the computers we have, now.”

“No problem. The computers can go out and get it, right from your computers. Same with the phones. They can take the contacts and other information right off the current phones with no problem. Even make the switch-over for you, so you're not having to deal with a carrier that keeps changing the rules,” Muriel said.

“You're kidding! I didn't think that was possible,” said Frederica.

“Semi-intelligent shields. The whole thing is made of them. Eager as a puppy, but better at obedience, and house broken,” Muriel said, grinning.

“I'll get right on that,” Frederica said. “If they're as good as you say they are, then they could save us some time and trouble. Especially with digging information out of companies that you buy up.”

“Well, since I'm totally useless, here, I'll just go back to my office and twiddle my thumbs. Let me know if there's anything I can do for you,” Muriel said, grinning, and translated back.

“How'd it go?” asked Ted.

“About like you'd expect. I'm useless. They knew all about the takeover, and were

already on top of it," Muriel said. "The only thing I could offer them was Jeff's computers and phones."

"Did I hear right, that we have a phone company, too?"

"Yep. Same company that I just took over makes phones, too. Or did you mean a carrier. We have that, too," Muriel said. "Jeff let that slip when he was talking to Judge Wright. He switched the number off of his current carrier onto us. Mostly, it's just to pin down the phone number. We don't really do anything. The phone, like the computer, does it all. In fact, the only reason that the computer needs an ISP is for emails. And I'm wondering if we can cure that, too. I'll have to talk to Jeff about it, sometime."

"Don't worry about it," Ted said. "I'll make sure they get them. Phones and computers. And I'll see about setting up Enclave as an ISP. I have a hunch that it will solve a lot of problems. And I need to feel useful, too."

"Well, if you insist . . ."

"Trust me. I'm good at this," Ted said.

"Wait a minute! I'm supposed to TRUST you? Mata! You always told me that he couldn't be trusted as far as I could throw him," said Muriel.

"He can't be. He's lying. However, he IS good at setting up companies and doing scut work. Under supervision. That's why he has Bart," Mata said.

"What is this? Put down Ted day? Why didn't I get the email? I don't have to take this abuse from you!" he said.

"Of course not," Muriel said, primly. "You can go anywhere and get abuse like this."

And Mata again made a bulls-eye on the monitor. Even Ted was chuckling. "You DO know, that that's an old joke, don't you," asked Ted.

"No! Is it? I wasn't around back then. Do tell me about it. Did you really have to carve your emails on slabs of stone?" Muriel asked. Mata calmly got up from her chair and came over to Muriel. And poured an entire glass of the grape and berry drink down the back of her tunic. And Ted folded up laughing, again.

Muriel pushed the drink away from her body, and dissolved it, then changed her uniform. "It's so nice to have an appreciative audience," she commented.

"Excuse me. I can come back later," said a male voice from the doorway.

"Naw. It's just been one of those days. Come in. Take a seat," Muriel said, indicating the chairs in front of her desk. "I'm Muriel. What can I do for you?"

“Well,” he began, “I’m a troubleshooter with your phone carrier. We got a notice that you were switching carriers, and wondered why?”

“Well, I’m not sure that I can go into much detail about an ongoing investigation. But I had to get another phone, and the carrier for it was nice enough to switch me over,” Muriel said. “Alice, I think I’ve got a live one. Troubleshooter for the phone carrier that time bombed my phone.”

“Hello, George. So you stopped chasing ambulances, huh?” asked Alice when she translated in, sitting in the other chair.

“What? How . . . ?”

“Envoy training. Saves on travel time,” said Alice. “And around Muriel, that’s a must. Now, what’s this about?”

“We just wanted to know why she switched carriers,” George said.

“Uh, huh. George, your company got our notice of criminal action against it. I know it did, since it was sent with the ultimate of ‘return receipt requested’. An Envoy delivered it, and the receipt was signed as he handed it over. In fact,” she said, pulling a page out of a file that she hadn’t been holding before, “you were the one that signed for it. So, now you come here posing as a troubleshooter trying to get information from my client. Naughty, naughty. You’re supposed to go through me, and you know it. Criminal proceedings have been initiated, and you have the same information that we have, as per the federal rules for discovery. Her phone was time bombed to break down in such a way that it would look like it was her fault. It was a programmed breakdown, and the programmer even put his name on it, copyrighting the piece of trash. The programmer works for your company. And a trace back showed us that he was ordered to create the program, ultimately, from the highest levels of the company. We have all the documentation, including emails, messages on paper, and phone conversations. It’s all in the brief and attachments to the brief.”

“Look, isn’t there some way we can avoid this action?” he asked.

“I don’t see how. Cutting a customer off two weeks before the end of the contract through an illegal program, and expecting her to pay full price for another phone, because she isn’t eligible for a new one, yet, PLUS increasing the price of the contract . . . well, that goes to the Federal Trade Commission as well as the criminal action for adding a program to her phone that she didn’t request, under the guise of it being an update. Nope. Looks like your company may be out of business, soon,” Alice said.

“Oh, come on, Alice. I never did anything to you!”

“Nope. You did it to my client. Do you even know who she is, beyond the fact that she works in Enclave?” asked Alice.

“What? She’s some sort of secretary or office manager, or something,” said George.

"Oh, GAD! Another lawyer that can't read. Alice, how do they even pass college, to say nothing of the bar," asked Muriel.

"He never passed the bar, Muriel. The best he could hope for was to become a corporate lawyer. And there's some question about how he got through college. And it's questions I don't want to know the answers to," Alice said. "George, for your information, allow me to introduce you to my client. This is Muriel, the Leader of Home and Ambassador to Earth. This entire Enclave is an Embassy in support of her, Ted, and a bunch of other Ambassadors that are her friends. George, your company tried to pull a nasty on the leader of a whole other world. You're allowed to say 'oh, shit', now, if you like."

"Oh, shit! What have they thrown me into?" said George. "Look, isn't there some way that we can come to an agreement?"

"I don't see how. George, what you may not realize is that you not only lost Muriel as a customer, you lost the entire Enclave, and every employee we have. Most of us already have the new phones, and the rest have their phones switched over to a new carrier," Alice said. "You really have nothing to offer us except your absence. We know who ordered the hit, who authorized it, and who created it. We even know who sent it to Muriel's phone. We know it ALL, George. Our methods of investigation are not like anything you're familiar with. And they're very complete. In about a month, your company is not going to exist."

"I need to make a phone call," he said, pulling out his phone. He looked at it, tried a few things, then said, "I must have forgotten to charge it up."

"Here," said Alice. "Just tell it who you want to connect to." And she handed him one of Jeff's phones.

"How? There's no keyboard."

"Just tell it. Talk. You know, use your mouth." George said a name. The phone asked for which office, and George goggled, but gave the location.

"Hello? Who is this?" came a voice from the phone.

"Tom, it's George. My phone isn't working, so I had to borrow one. Tom, they know the whole thing. The whole chain. And they're talking about Federal Trade Commission as well as criminal court. The girl's lawyer is saying that the company won't exist in a month. Oh, and the girl? She's the leader of Home, Tom."

"Well, there's the severance penalty for terminating the contract early," Tom said.

"Tom, you don't get it. They switched EVERYBODY in Enclave. All the employees, everything, over to the new carrier."

"Well, that just makes it more expensive for them. Don't worry about it, George. They

can't do anything to us. We'll still be around."

"Wanna bet," said Muriel. "You just created a war against a whole other world."

"What? Who's that?"

"My name is Muriel. I'm the Leader of Home and Ambassador to Earth. And in a little while you're going to get a visit from the FBI, and the arrests will start. I know, because my phone is keeping track of the activities involved in this case. Oh, and Tom? Your name is on the list as the one authorizing the action against my phone. And it was a VP in charge of sales that instigated it. When they're through, we'll pick up all your customers and switch them over for free, while your company is closed down, so they won't be out of service for your incompetence. Of course, when they find out what we offer, and what it costs, they may stay with us, but that's your risk. As for severance, I think the Federal Trade Commission might have something to say about that, when they're told who severed the connection, and how. Still think you'll be in existence?"

"Isn't there some way that we can come to an agreement?" asked Tom.

"Sure. Everyone associated with this mess fired for cause. You may still face criminal charges, but we won't push it. All the severance nullified, immediately, and no exceptions. I find out from one of the employees of Enclave that they've been hit with charges, and the balloon goes up again. After that, we'll fight it out with you in the marketplace," Muriel said.

"You can't compete with us," Tom said. "You aren't connected to the network of cell towers that the rest of the carriers are."

"We don't need to be. It's a whole new technology. Phones, connections, the works. And better service, better support – we replace anything that breaks. Period – and better contracts. And you'd better decide fast, because you're running out of time."

"Hang up the phone, mister. I have a warrant for your arrest," said a familiar voice.

"Henry? Give him a minute. He's got a decision to make."

"Who's this? MURIEL? Girl, what ARE you doing!" Henry asked.

"Throwing my weight around, of course," said Muriel.

"You don't HAVE any weight. I could pick you up with one hand. Alright, alright," Henry said, "if you think you can clear some of this up, I'll give you a couple of minutes. Just make it fast."

"Well, Tom? Which way will it be? You arrested and the company dead, immediately? Or we come to an agreement, and the company gets to TRY to stay alive?" asked Muriel.

"I can't just arbitrarily make such a decision without higher authority. And that'll take

time,” Tom said.

“Sorry, Tom, but you've run out of time. I hope you know the name of a GOOD lawyer, and not the hack you sent to my office to try to pump me,” Muriel said.

“Wait! Wait! You aren't even going to give us a break?” asked Tom.

“Did you give me one?” asked Muriel.

“Muriel, why don't you come here. Bring your lawyer and whatever is in your office. I'll hold the action until the face-to-face is concluded. But not longer,” Henry said.

“On it. Mata, one squad and you, please. Alice, would you join us, please?” Muriel stood up and switched to fighting formals, complete with the hat.

“You bet I'll join you. Got a location?” asked Alice.

“Henry? Image, please.” And Henry sent her an image of the office. Suddenly, Tom was surrounded by gray uniforms and one very chick pants suit. He immediately homed in on Alice.

“Muriel, you've got to understand . . . ,” he started, then stopped when Alice pointed to Muriel.

“You? You're just a kid!” Tom said. As an answer, Muriel pulled out her Home passport and handed it to him.

“You really ought to keep up with current events, Tom. I've been plastered all over the news for the past four years. And yes, a sixteen year old girl is the Leader of Home. You notice I said 'Leader' and not 'ruler'. I don't rule. I simply go in a direction that all of Home sees as good. So they follow me,” Muriel said. “Get whoever you need to talk to on the phone, and come to a decision. Quick. Otherwise, Henry is going to have to arrest you. Best suggestion? Start at the top. But quick is the word. If this goes after the court closes, we won't be able to quash the warrants.”

Tom punched a button on his phone. “Shirley? Listen . . . no, just shut up and listen. You started this mess, and now I've got the Leader of Home and an FBI agent in my office. They're going to roll up the whole chain – arrest us all unless we come to an agreement before the court closes. The agreement is that we're all fired for cause, and all severances are nullified. Yes, ALL of them. They pulled out all the employees of Enclave when you pulled that stunt that you said couldn't be traced. Well, they traced it No, I'm not kidding. I told you that when the paperwork hit my desk No, I'm NOT taking the fall for it. Besides, your name is listed in the brief and in the attachments. They KNOW it was you that started it. What were you thinking, pulling a stunt like this on the Leader of Home Yes, that's who you had cut off, the Leader of Home, Muriel Alternative? I'll give you an alternative! We get arrested for criminal activity, and the company is closed and all the records seized No, I'm not kidding. And Muriel told me that if that happens, all our

customers will get switched to their phone company, without a charge. And she expects that, once the customers find out what Enclave has to offer, that they won't come back, even if the company is allowed to continue after the court cases Yea, dead in the water No, I don't think we stand a chance of beating this one. They've got ALL the information. Shirley, you're running out of time. You've got five seconds before I call the president of the company and tell him what's going down. Fine, Shirley. Good luck."

He punched another button. "Sir, an action has taken place that could result in the permanent, and immediate closure of the company, and the loss of all our customers. The only way out is to fire all those that were involved with it, for cause." Then he started naming names, including his own. "Yes, sir. Shirley initiated an action to crash the phone of Muriel Yes, THAT Muriel. She's in my office, now, along with her lawyer and an FBI agent. You either fire us, or we're all arrested and the company shut down and the records seized by the court Fine, sir Yes, sir, I realize that, and I accept the responsibility."

"Just have him have it typed up and signed. We'll retrieve it and disseminate it for him," said Alice. "It'll be faster that way." Five tense minutes went by, then Alice pulled the documents out of her 'no pocket', handed one to Tom, then the rest disappeared, one by one. She pulled out another document and put it on the desk for Muriel to sign. Once signed and sealed with the Home logo, Alice sent that off. "Henry, you should be getting an alert about now."

"Yep. Just came across. Warrants quashed." Henry looked blank for a second, then turned to Muriel. "You know, girl, one of these days I've just got to see how you START such things, and how you manage to get things done so quickly."

"Talent, Henry," she said, smiling. "Pure, blinding talent. And a little help from my friends. We done here, or is there something more I need to take care of."

"Nothing from me," said Henry.

"Or me, either," said Alice.

"OK. Tom, get with the rest of the names on the list. If any of you can't find work because of this, come out to Enclave. We can't put you in in your former positions – you crossed a line when you engaged in an illegal act. But we can find something for you, even if it's just sweeping streets. Something to keep your families fed, anyway," said Muriel. "Troops, let's go home." And they translated out.

Chapter 7

Pick a Little, Talk a Little
(Tuesday morning, a week later)

"What have you heard about that new phone company?" the man asks.

"What new phone company?" asks the woman.

"That one out of Enclave in Arizona. Just started up, but they say the phone they've got does some amazing things," he said.

She looked at him, skeptically. "WHO says. You know I don't like rumors."

"Two of the guys at the office have them. And they were telling me that the phones can connect to anyone in the world, And the prices are unbelievable. Fifty dollars for the phone, and ten dollars for the connection."

"Got to be a catch," she said. "Some cheap Chinese knockoff, or something."

"Naw, not the Chinese. They stopped exporting anything after that business with the country being taken over. No," he said, "the phones are made in America. Some factory in the area outside of Phoenix, someplace."

"Oh?" she asked. "How do American's make them for so little?"

"I have no idea," he replied. "Oh, here comes our bus." They board and find seats, and he continued, "But I intend to find out. Any company that can honestly come up with a phone, like those two were talking about, that affordable and has good service at least deserves the chance to prove themselves. I think I'll give them a call when we get to work."

"Excuse me," said the woman across the aisle. "Are you talking about the phone company that is run by those people in the Enclave? Aren't they some sort of religious group?"

"Not that I know of," said the man. "I'll admit that they're a bit strange. They say they come from some other world, or something. Personally, I don't care what people believe as long as they're decent. But if they can come up with something that's better than some of these companies, I want to know more about it. Look what happened to that one company that tried to sue Enclave. Enclave now owns them. Or what about that phone company that just went bust. No warning, just suddenly they didn't exist any more, Something about criminal activity in how they treated their customers. There's getting to be too much of that stuff. The whole reason that the economy went south."

"Well," said the second woman, "I can tell you that I had my phone through the one that went bust, and suddenly I wasn't able to use it. So, I used my friend's phone to call the other

company. Some guy came out, wearing a strange suit, asked me what my phone number was, Did something to my phone, then said that I was re-connected. And I was. And better quality sound than I'd had before, and no more dropped calls. I wonder if that's who took over the company?"

"Naw," said a man behind her. "It was probably the government. Always poking their nose into everything and ruining things for everyone."

"I don't know," the second woman said. "I've never seen anyone from the government that wore a suit like that. All gray, and like he glowed."

"Well, in any case, I'm making the call when I get to work. I'll soon find out what's going on. And if it's as good as they say it is, I'm getting one."

"Yea? What's the number," asked the first woman. "If it's that good, maybe I should look into it, too."

"1-866-875-7533," said the first man. "I'll let you know what I find out, tonight after work."

And in a quiet office in an area South East of Phoenix, a teenager talks to a friend of hers. "So, what's happening with the phone company?"

"Muriel," said Jeff, "I didn't believe you. I apologize. We had to put on twenty more people to take the calls, and a hundred and fifty 'service representatives' from Home. I'll never doubt you again."

"Uh, huh. Until the next time, anyway," and they both laughed. "Seriously," Muriel said, "there was a chocolate manufacturer that, for years, the only advertising they did was word of mouth. They became one of the biggest manufacturers of candy bars in the country. I figured if it could work for them, it could work for us. We just had to start the snowball rolling, and see how it built up."

"Well, it sure built up. Police, fire and ambulance companies all across the country are using the phones. Corporations are starting to come on board, and at those prices, they can GIVE phones to their people. We make sure that they understand that, once they give an employee the phone, it's his to keep. Not company property. And they're STILL buying it," Jeff said. "And now, we're getting word-of-mouth from people on the street. We just had two calls from people that ride together on the bus every day. It's unnerving."

"And little by little, the world becomes a smaller place. Long distance calls without the cost. And better reception and less hassle than people have ever had before. Did you know that Anna's got people selling them in Russia?" asked Muriel.

"No, I hadn't heard that," said Jeff. "That's her branch of Triple E, so the information would have gone back to Frederica's crew, not mine."

"Yea, she started with Sergei. And you know how closed mouthed HE is," said Muriel with a grin.

"Yea. Right. On a bad day he can only be heard on the other side of Moscow," Jeff said. "And that's when he's got laryngitis. He's a better rumor machine than anything I've ever heard of. Better even than infomercials."

"Yep. You got it," Muriel said. "She gave him a phone, taught him how to use it, transferred everything over, like you did with me, and turned him loose. She even showed him how to use the search program. I think he's in love."

"With Anna? Or the phone?"

"Now, now," Muriel said. "Anna's too young for him. I think. Besides, her mother has become her constant companion and strongest supporter, once Anna figured out a place for her in her organization. Mostly, she's Anna's chaperon."

"So, what's her mother do?"

"She's Anna's 'advisor'. Sits in a chair in Anna's casual area, and discusses problems and policy with Anna. Helps her understand what's going on in the country and how to cure the problems," said Muriel.

"Isn't that dangerous? I mean, sure, she's a nice lady and all, but she's kinda out of touch with what's really going on."

"That's the beauty of it. What she doesn't realize is that Anna's asking 'innocent' questions that force her mother to better research the problem, instead of going on the word-of-mouth that's on the street and television," said Muriel.

"You mean, Anna's forcing her to face reality?" Jeff said, and started laughing.

"Yep. And doing it in such a way that her mother really thinks she IS advising her daughter. Nasty. Devious. I love it," Muriel said. "I just wish I knew where Anna got the idea."

"Oh, well, dear, that would be us," said Lily, coming into the casual area. "Fred and I had a talk with Anna's mother, and realized that she didn't have a clue."

"Mom! Dad! Come in. What can I do for you?"

"It's what we did for you, hon. We talked to Anna and suggested that she ask 'kid type' questions. You know, the ones you were asking us when we were so sick, and couldn't answer? Well, when Mark cured us, we started looking at those questions, and doing the research to find out," said Lily.

"Yes, and that's when I began to realize that you really DID know what you were

doing,” Fred added. “And it’s starting to work. Anna’s mother is actually starting to talk like an intelligent person. And she’s questioning some of the things that are on television. Some of the questions have led Anna to find ways to stop some of the corruption in Russia.”

“So, you see, Muriel,” Lily said, “it’s all your fault. You asked us questions that we couldn’t answer without doing the research. And Anna’s doing the same thing. But it’s drawn the two of them closer together.”

Chuck brought in coffee for the two of them as they sat down. “Now, politics,” said Fred. “I never understood just how bad it was until I started researching it. Oh, I know. You’ve got a lot more research available than we do, hon, but even the little that we could do, we saw what you were trying to do, because we saw what some of the connections were.”

“Oh, I know,” Muriel said. “None of them are lily white. Oops, sorry, mom. No, wait a minute! No I’m NOT sorry. None of them ARE you. You’d make a better politician than most of them.”

“Hmm. I think I’m going to have to start sending the soap, again. Such dirty thoughts – thinking I could be a politician,” her mother said.

“No, look at it. You’re not influenced by corporations bribing you with money and gifts. You’re not being told what to say by some stupid political machine that hasn’t got a clue. You listen to people, and know what their concerns are,” Muriel said. “That, right there, is more than any of the politicians do. And you’ve got the resources to be able to BE informed, and the ability to gain the knowledge of whatever position you went for. You and dad, both.”

“Lily, dear, where did we go wrong?” Fred asked. “Here, I thought we’d raised our daughter to be respectful and intelligent, and she goes and says that we should become politicians. Unheard of, absurd. Politicians! Unthinkable.”

“Now, now, dear. I’m sure she means well,” Lily replied. “She’s just misguided by all these strange people that constantly surround her and make her think above her station in life.”

“Uh, huh. Want to pull the other one, now?” Muriel asked. “So I don’t walk lopsided?”

“Oh, my! Now she doesn’t believe us!” Lily said. “It must be that teenage rebellion we keep hearing about.”

“Well, I can understand why you wouldn’t want to become politicians, and straighten out the mess the country is in. After all, you get everything you want, here, free. You don’t have to work for anything, don’t have to feel that it’s your responsibility to your country to try to correct the situation. I quite understand,” Muriel said. “Say no more.”

“Oh, dear! I think that did it,” Fred said. “She’s just thrown a challenge at us. I suppose there’s nothing for it but that I run for County Supervisor. And what can we put you in for, Lily?”

"I don't know, dear. I suppose I COULD run against you. Do you think that would cause too much tension in the family?" asked Lily. "I mean, here we'd be on opposite sides of the election and all."

Jeff, shocked by the by-play, looked at Muriel, who was grinning. "What . . . ?" he asked.

"Hush. You haven't been out much, have you. There's signs all up and down Ironwood Drive. They ARE running against each other, and I expect that one of them will actually get elected. I'm just wondering what appointment the other one will get," said Muriel.

"State senate elections are coming up in a couple of years," Fred said. "Oops." And they all laughed.

"So, what started you on this intrepid journey?" asked Muriel.

"Talking with some of our friends," Fred said. "They pointed out that the machine was broken, and someone was needed to fix it. We plan on stacking the deck, some. County Supervisor is just a dodge. What we're aiming for is to become the head of the two party committees in this county, then climb up from there."

"What's your platform?" their daughter asked.

"Honesty in government. That means transparency of what's going on," Lily said.

"Oh, they're not going to like that. People actually KNOWING what politicians are doing? Why, you'll turn the country into a democracy that way," said Muriel.

"Oh, I suppose we'll just have to risk it," said Lily.

"Actually, we don't expect to be elected to the County Supervisor's position. I'm sure somebody will 'discover' some irregularities, like the fact that we live in Enclave, which is essentially another country," Fred said. "That it's stated on the form, and the form was approved by the Board of Elections doesn't matter. But it's at that point where we start with transparency. Like the fact that certain politicians have been hiding the fact that they are receiving funds from various businesses in order to pass legislation in favor of the businesses. Or the fact that certain other politicians live outside the county. All sorts of things."

"So, you're making targets of yourself," Muriel said. "Do you know how dangerous it is?"

"Is it? You've been doing it since you were twelve," said Lily.

"Yes, and I always have my shield up, and it's always over strengthened, ever since that principal shot at me," Muriel said. "I don't presume that there isn't a way to kill me."

People are very inventive. Especially people up to no good. It was that over strength shield that kept me alive when that jerk had a chain bomb tossed at me.”

“I know, honey. And we've learned from you. And also, we don't go out of Enclave very much,” her mother said. “We don't have a need to. Fred and I have talked to Fran, our security chief, and learned how you did it, and how you keep it. And she's checked it over and over for a while, to make sure it was a habit.”

“So, you think you're invulnerable?” asked Muriel.

“No more so than you do,” her mother said. “Honey, it's something we can do. Or at least start. Everyone knows that politics is dirty. All you have to do is see the campaign ads on television to realize that none of them deserve to be in office. But the people aren't given the opportunity to fairly choose who they want to govern. That's done by political machines that should have been put out of business years ago for illegal activities and anti-constitutional reasons. You've seen some of it. You've even stopped some of it. But, unfortunately, there's more people ready to take over and keep the network of graft and corruption going. We'd like to see an end to it. But, unlike other wars where you can cut the head off the snake and it dies, here you need to clean up the small stuff, first, so it can no longer support the upper ranks.”

“You WILL keep me informed of any action. BEFORE the action takes place. Won't you.” Muriel was furious. But knew that she was helpless to stop what her parents had decided to start. The best she could do is try to be prepared for the blast, when it came, and provide as much protection as she could. “Let me see your passports,” she said, not hiding the anger she was feeling.

“What? But”

She didn't bother waiting for them, but drew them out of 'no pockets', herself. Glanced at them, and handed them back. “You may need this to stay out of some sorts of trouble,” she said. And when they looked, they realized that they'd been upgraded to Ambassador Plenipotentiary. Which meant that where ever they went, they were on Embassy duty. “I'm not kidding about you letting me know before you take any action. We,” she said, indicating the whole office, “MIGHT be able to keep you from getting hurt in the process. I won't stop you. You're old enough to know your own minds,” she added, tossing back at them some of what they'd tossed at her four years ago. “But I can HOPE that you think before you do anything rash. In the mean time, I want a detailed brief on how you intend to take over the local party, when it's quite happy to go the way it has been going. I want to see you in my office, tomorrow morning WITH THAT BRIEF, so we can go over it.” Then she translated to her apartment.

“I think she meant it, Lily.”

“I KNOW she did, Fred. Somehow, I don't think we handled this as well as we could have.”

In the mean time, Mata had translated to Muriel's apartment, where she found the most astounding sight. Her friend and nemesis was curled up in her chair, LAUGHING. She walked around to the front of the chair to attract her attention.

“Oh, my.” Muriel said. “I don't think I've had so much fun and had such a hard time doing it. But I had to. I had to act like I was furious with them for putting themselves in danger, and ORDER them to show up, tomorrow. Otherwise, they'd have just blown it off as my nerves over the possibility – that they think is remote – of getting hurt,” she said. “I'll come back down when I know they're gone.

Chapter 8

Talk a Little More

(Tuesday afternoon, Wednesday morning)

And in other news, Lily and Fred White have both entered the race for County Supervisor – on opposite sides. And their campaign signs are set on the road, like this.

View of campaign signs, with the opponents facing each other, and glowering.

And in a certain office in that county, in a restricted Enclave noted for its unorthodox behavior, the daughter of the principals sat roaring with laughter. Mata walked into her charges office and looked at her quizzically.

“Oh, my,” Muriel finally sputtered out. “It’s bad enough that they’ve got the signs beside each other, and are scowling at each other. But MOM’S sign. ‘Tired of dirty politics? Make it Lily White!’ She HATES that old joke. And here she is, USING it.”

“You DO realize, don’t you, that with that campaign going, they’ve already forced out all the opposition,” Mata said. “And so far, it looks like your mother’s in the lead.”

“And they think I’m outrageous,” Muriel said. “I’m just glad I’m not old enough to vote. I’d be caught right in the middle of it.”

“Well, don’t look now, but somebody’s made the connection. Media’s coming in to interview you,” Mata replied.

“Are you sure they’re coming to see me?” asked Muriel.

“Well, they’re headed to your office,” Mata replied. “And, if they wanted your parents, they’d have gone to their campaign headquarters, wouldn’t they?”

“Hmm. You could be right. OK, utilities and the hat time. Make it look like I’m working for a living,” Muriel replied, and changed her uniform, then walked out to meet the press.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. What can I do for you?” she asked. And the questions started.

“Is Enclave backing your parents?” – “Does this mean that Enclave is part of the county, now?” – “Which one of them will you be voting for?” – “How much are you contributing to their campaign?”

“Whoa, hold it, people. I think you’re jumping to conclusions again. And without any facts to back up your outlandish ideas. First, Enclave is not contributing to either one of the campaigns. Nor would we. Home and Enclave are not partisan to any government on earth. Second, somebody hasn’t done their homework. I’m not old enough to vote. Third, Enclave

is private property which, under the treaty with the United States, is considered an Embassy. We are not part of or subject to the government of any city, county, state, or nation on earth. And fourth, Enclave is non-political. What my parents do is their business. In fact, I only just found out about it, today. And, to be perfectly honest, I'm somewhat dismayed that they should decide to immerse themselves in the fetid swamp of politics. I just hope they can come out of this without being besmirched with the stigma of having run for office. Now, if you want information on them, I suggest that you talk to them. I'm sure they'd be glad to help you understand their position." And with that, Muriel turned around and walked back into her office.

"You know they aren't going to believe you, don't you?" asked Mata.

"Of course," Muriel replied. "I expect the 'headlines' will be something like, 'What is the Leader of Home trying to hide?' It's always so comforting to see the media behave in a predictable manner. However, I want as much information as I can get on the two parties in this county, Mata. This was entirely too quick to be coincidence. I think they're trying to set me up as a way of sinking BOTH campaigns."

"Oh, is that all you want?" asked Mata, handing Muriel a disk. "Why didn't you say something sooner?" And she smiled, sweetly, at her young boss. "I think you'll enjoy this."

Muriel went to her desk and inserted the disk. What followed were muttered exclamations of 'what?' and 'you've GOT to be kidding', and other such utterances of disbelief. Finally, she turned to Mata, who was waiting for it, and said, "They're tied! Both parties answer to the same people! How can that be?"

"Simple. The Powers That Be decided that this state should reflect only one party's policies, and that it should be the one most vocally aligned with business," Mata said. "So, even the candidates from the opposing party are actually in line with the first."

"Do my parents know this?"

"Who do you think gave me the disk, Muriel. They know. That's why they're running. They don't expect that either one of them will be elected. They'll be knocked out in the primary, if not sooner. And then the leaks will start as they 'compare notes' on their campaigns. They got around the residency requirement by purchasing a small house outside of Enclave, just down the road from here, on the other side of Gantzel. You know – that housing tract. They put in an appearance, there, every so often. But they're not stupid enough to actually stay there. They're expecting that, sometime after they are out of the race and the leaks begin, that there will suddenly be a fire there, or something. The point is that they'll be listed as dead. So, don't be too upset if you hear that in the news. Check, first."

"Wait a minute!" said Muriel. "Do the media know about any of this?"

"Possibly. Why?"

"Because that would explain their presence here, today," Muriel said. "It was a feeler –

trying to find out if they could pump me for information, and I shut them down. Maybe I shouldn't have."

"Let it play out," Mata said. "I don't think you hurt anything by what you said. In fact, you may have helped it, depending on how your parents want to play this."

"Grrr! I hate waiting."

"Relax, girl. We're monitoring the media offices. We'll have an idea of what's happening almost before they do," grinned Mata.

And Wednesday morning found her parents in her office, trying to explain what they were doing without actually saying anything. "Mother," Muriel said, "you know that doesn't work with me. You've got a plan in operation, and you're trying to feed ME mis-information. Not going to happen. I happen to know you've got dirt on the party committees, themselves. AND I have an idea of how you intend to use it. I just don't know when."

"Well, actually, neither do we. A lot depends on how the party leaders react, and when. They could pull all sorts of legalities to knock us out of the race," Lily said. "Goodness knows that we left enough tracks for them to follow that a blind, scent-bombed, arthritic dog could follow the trail. The fact that we live here, and simply have a house down the street that we don't actually live in. The fact that we're running against each other, but on the same platform, just different parties. Heck, we've even given them bogus contributors. We expected that they'd have bitten before. But nothing! It's like they're fat, dumb, and happy – fat turkeys just waiting for the ax to fall."

"Did you try forcing it?" asked their daughter.

"Yes. That's what the campaign signs were about. They were so over-the-top that I thought sure they'd react," Fred said. "They didn't. I don't know what we did wrong."

"Hmm. Maybe nothing. They may be playing a different game," Muriel replied. "What if they wanted you to win – well, at least one of you – for their own purposes. What would the purposes be? Mata? Anything on them?"

"Looking. I think I see where you're going, and your on-duty squad is checking emails and social networking. But if they're keeping it off the Internet, then we might not find anything," Mata replied.

"We're looking at this the wrong way," Muriel said. "Hold on. Mom, dad, who are the people in the party committee?" As her parents fed her names, she passed them to her phone. And a pattern began to develop, as well as a paperwork trail – and Muriel got a grim smile on her face. "You're being played. Are your campaign workers taking in any money? And from where?"

"Well, they're not supposed to be," Fred said. "How would we know?"

"Give me the names of the committee members," Mata said. "I know you've done part of this work," she added. "But we might be able to find something new using the phones search routine." Muriel handed her back the disk. "Duh! The computer can do the same thing. OK, hold on."

"What's she going to do?" asked Lily.

"She's going to feed the disk to the computer, and tell it to go looking for certain things in relation to it. Particularly things that AREN'T on the Internet," Muriel replied. "You'd be surprised what these computers and phones can do."

"Oh, my," Mata suddenly said. "Oh, my goodness. Fred, Lily, you have NO idea what you decided to step in. This isn't just this county. It's state-wide. And may go further than that, from what I'm seeing. Muriel, tell Jeff that I LOVE this computer. Your parents disk – well, the computer used it as a sample, and is pulling in from everywhere. Phone records, for connections and contacts, social networking, emails, letters and messages. AND it's structuring it in a tree structure or organizational chart structure. And it's huge. Yep, it's going state and nation-wide. The whole network. And the two parties are connected, like a bad price-fixing scam."

"But . . . how is it getting paper documents?" asked Fred.

"Oh, that's something we saw with Judge Wright," Muriel said. "He was able to access his law books and case records for information on one of our trials. I don't know HOW the computer or phone – and yes, the phone can do the same thing – does it, or how Jeff programmed it. Actually, maybe he didn't. Maybe he just gave it a generalized instruction and because it's semi-intelligent shields, it found its own way to do things. The point is, it works."

"This is going to give Melanie fits," Mata said. "Especially when she finds out how we got the information."

"How you got WHAT information?" Melanie said, walking through the door.

"Oops. NOW we're in trouble," Muriel said. Melanie walked over behind Mata and looked at the screen.

"What is . . . ? Wait a minute. I recognize some of these names. They're high ranking figures in the political parties. Just what are you working on?" she asked.

"My parents are running for County Supervisor," Muriel said. "AGAINST each other. The purpose was to flush – and I use that term advisably – flush out the dirt in the political parties. They'd come up with some information, and we fed it into Mata's computer and told it to find the connections."

"Yes, yes. But where are you getting THIS?" Melanie demanded. "You're pulling letters and messages that aren't on the Internet!"

"It's a very advanced computer," Muriel said. "Something that Jeff came up with. It CAN use programming, but doesn't have to. Nor does it have an operating system. The whole thing is semi-intelligent shields. I thought we got you one, and a phone to go with it."

"We got new computers. And phones. But I didn't know they could do this!" Melanie replied. "Do you realize what you have, here?"

"Yea. The ultimate Sigint," Muriel replied. "Signals Intelligence that goes beyond anything that any of your alphabet groups have."

"Muriel, this isn't legal!"

"Enclave. A property of Home and under Home rule, Melanie. OUR rules apply here," Muriel replied. "Oh, and it only works this way for those that are Envoy trained. For anybody else, it acts like a normal computer, but with the capability of running any legal program, regardless of operating system."

Melanie stared at the computer, like it was something about to bite her. Implications of what she was seeing on screen disturbed her. She could see applications of this that went completely outside of American law. She could see both the good and the evil that could come of using these capabilities.

And finally, she asked, "Can it translate?"

"Why don't you come into my office, and we'll find out," Muriel said. Melanie followed, looking somewhat shell-shocked. "What my parents got was just what was readily available on the Internet. The sort of stuff that anyone can get hold of. Basic connections between people, such as social networking connections, resumes or work histories, articles, biographies, stuff like that. They don't think like you and I do. They don't think about the deeper connections. They were just looking for enough to cast rumor concerning the two major political parties, and how they were being run, and by whom."

"But, in this country, there's supposed to be a presumption of innocence," Melanie said.

"Yes, there is. Until the suspicion of guilt rears its ugly head," Muriel replied. "And there was enough suspicion in what they found to at least raise the question of just how open and honest the committees were in selecting candidates for nomination to office. That's how they used the system to begin their campaigning. And in doing that, demonstrated the ridiculousness of the whole process by doing the outrageous – running against each other. But, looking at it, Mata and I saw something deeper. There were too many connections between the two parties. That's what Mata is tracking down, now. And, when she gets done, you can have the information and roll this 'good-old-boys' bunch of assholes up."

"Muriel, I never asked you this before, but I think it's time to ask it, now," Melanie said. "With all the training, all the knowledge you've acquired – do you think of yourself as some sort of super hero?"

"Nope. I'm just a young girl," Muriel said. "Yes, I've got abilities. So do thousands, now. And with that many, there's nothing 'super' about me. Just a little girl, trying to stay alive in a nasty world. And, in my own way, try to make it a little better. I've never said I was better than anybody else, Melanie. In fact, there's whole bunches of people that are probably better than I am. At least, in their own way. You're one of them."

"So, what do we do with these computers, and these phones?" asked Melanie, still worried.

"Whatever we can," Muriel replied, grimly. "We work out what the ethics are for these devices, and we USE them. They aren't 'big brother', Melanie. The bad guys can't use them this way, because it takes the training and the mental link. For them, they're just a computer. It's only when the commands are given mentally that the full scope of the searches is activated. It takes the depth of the mental idea. Words are too shallow. Look, why don't we go to lunch, then we can tackle the translating side of this. OK?"

"Yea, maybe we'd better," Melanie said. "I'm still trying to get my head around what I've seen."

Chapter 9

The Window on the World

(Wednesday afternoon)

“All right,” Muriel said, as they sat in her office after lunch, “you’ve got something special in mind that you want to have translated. What is it?”

“Um, this goes no further, Muriel,” Melanie said.

“How many things have we gone through, involving intelligence gathering, that I HAVE talked about?”

“Yea. OK. NSA has been picking up some signals that we really don’t understand. I was hoping maybe you could help. It’s why I came in the first place.”

“OK. You’ve got one of Jeff’s phones?” asked Muriel

“Yea, why?”

“It’s as powerful and has as much memory as your computer. And, if you set it up right, it’s connected to your computer. So,” Muriel said, “just tell it to connect to your computer, and tell it where to find the file. You can do the whole thing mentally. I don’t need to know a thing. In fact, if you want, I’ll leave.”

“No! No, don’t leave. I may need your help telling it what I want it to do,” Melanie said.

“Oh, I doubt that. Just tell it to translate the file to something that you’d understand,” Muriel said. “That way, if it isn’t a language or a code, it can still handle it. Like, if it’s a picture or something.”

“You mean it can break codes?”

“I don’t know,” Muriel said. “But we can find out.”

“Goof.”

“Yea, but it’s so much fun.” Muriel replied with a grin.

Melanie looked at her phone for a couple of minutes, then said, “Um . . . Muriel? I think you’re going to have to see this, too. I’ll send it to your computer.” She did, and Muriel opened it up, and after a few lines a very grim look came over her face.

“OK. It’s time to take them out. I’m afraid my parents just got trumped,” she said.

“Yea. Big time. Mata, how many people are involved in your research?” asked

Melanie.

“Oh, about a thousand. Why?” asked Mata.

“Because I think I'm going to need help rolling this up. Any of it out of the country?”

“Nope,” Mata replied. “You still haven't said why, though.”

“Because somebody thinks they've found a way to neutralize shields, and kill Envoys and Envoy trained people. And intends to do so,” Melanie said. “I think I'm going to have to tell the President about this.”

“Better make it fast, then. Some of the information I've seen suggests that they're going to move pretty soon,” Mata said. “Any idea where their research is?”

“Yea. Our old nemesis. CIA.”

“How about we just destroy the whole building?” Mata said, grinning.

“That might attract attention, but I'll consider it. Hold on.” Melanie went blank for about five minutes, obviously in communication with someone. And, from what she'd said, Muriel and Mata thought it might possibly be the President. Moments later, a piece of paper was in her hand. She read it, then handed it to Muriel.

Muriel read it, then said and sent, “Ted, I think you might want to see this.”

“What have you got?” he said, translating into her office.

“Information that doesn't go out of this office without Melanie's approval,” she replied. “We're actually working two sides of the same problem, without realizing it. My parents stumbled on connections between the major political parties, and Mata's working the whole tree of information right now. And it's not pretty. It goes all the way to the top of the national committees. Then Melanie dropped this bombshell on me,” she added, and turned the screen around.

“What am I looking at, here?” he asked.

“The translation of a coded message between party leaders and somebody at our old nemesis, CIA. Somebody activating the old CIA research and development section has come up with a way to penetrate shields. From the look of it, it would outright kill Envoys, and either kill trained humans, or leave them drooling idiots that wouldn't even be able to know how to take nourishment. And there's a couple of names in the top party committees that I recognize, but you probably wouldn't. The President's former chief of staff and the former head of Homeland Security.”

“How'd you come up with this information?” asked Ted.

"Jeff's computers. The new model. They're like a window on the world. The fact that they're semi-intelligent means that you can give them somewhat open requests, and the computer takes it from there. We fed Mata's computer with the information that my parents were able to get off the Internet, concerning the parties in this county. And Mata's computer went crazy, finding tie-ins to letters and messages, going all the way up to the top of the national committees. This, though," Muriel went on, "is a declaration of war. They want to kill us! Thousands, maybe millions of people with Envoy training, and they want to kill us just so they can control the country and maybe the world. Haven't they caused enough trouble in the world?"

"Could there be something else driving them?" asked Ted.

"I don't know. And I don't know how to solve this one, short of killing hundreds of people," Muriel said. "Or bringing the judgment to them, which would be just about as bad, if it could even be done on that kind of a scale and over that much territory."

"Judgment would be better. Let me get some bright boys on it, and see if we can just trigger it without the image of Judgment Square around them," Ted said. "In the mean time, we need to let the President know what's going on. I'm afraid that's going to be up to Melanie. Give her what we have, both this and Mata's computer information. Melanie, make sure he understands just how widespread the lose of life would be if they manage to get this out. And shut down that DAMNED CIA!" he added, vehemently.

"Not until we can roll the whole thing up, Ted," Muriel said. "If the information is out there, then someone else would just take it and run with it. We've got to take the whole thing down at once. And we need the device. We need to know if it can really do what they think it can do, and how it does it."

"Huh," Ted said. "Now THERE'S a reversal. Usually it's me trying to talk you out of rash action. But, you're right. Everything but the device. We've GOT to get that and examine it. But the rest – yes,, they all need to be taken down at the same time. Alright, how can we get the device without their knowing that we have it?"

"Melanie, can you get the authorization for us to do some further research in this matter?" asked Muriel.

"You've got it. I'll even put it in writing," she replied. "But who would understand the information, even when you get it?"

"Jeff," Muriel shot back. "And maybe some of the bright boys from Home. Alright, I've got the computer searching for the specs and drawings on the device. Let's see what we get." ::Jeff? Could you come to my office, please?::

"Yea? What's up?"

"Your bright little computer just laid a bombshell on us, and we want you to take a look at some specs and drawings," Muriel said, without letting on what the the device was. She

wanted him to figure it out for himself. "It's doing a search, now, and we should have something shortly. Do we need a printer large enough to print the drawings out?"

"Naw, that won't be necessary. Once I see them, I can just make them as shields turned into paper. But, if they're large," he said, "you may have to clear your desk or put up a table to hold them."

"You stay away from my desk. I'll just make the coffee table larger for this," she replied. And shortly, he had the drawings laid out on the table, and the specs beside them. He started with the drawings, looking them all over, and cross checking them against others in the stack. Finally, he sat back.

"Muriel, this is a killer. It's meant to kill humans," he said.

"Yea, those with Envoy training. Oh, and Envoys, too," she replied.

"Then they blew it. This won't kill Envoys or those with Envoy training. What it will do is separate the Envoy soul from a human body IF the Envoy soul isn't in solid connection with the body. It'll kill normals," he said. "In fact, it will also kill whoever operates it, if they aren't Envoy trained. The reason is that it's supposed to break through shields. But both the Envoys and those trained use tagged shields that would ignore the attempt and keep it out. I had to look close to figure it out, but what it does isn't break the shield, but try to separate the power from the intelligence."

"Wouldn't that do the same thing?" she asked.

"Nope. Envoys have a shield around them, even when they're in stealth. Envoy trained humans have AT LEAST one shield around them constantly, that's told to keep out anything that would hurt the human. Two, if they're wearing clothes," he said. "So, the trigger would never reach the soul. It would kill normal humans by killing the soul. Probably kill the human body, too."

"You're sure of this?" asked Melanie.

"As sure as I can be without building it and trying it on someone. Either way, it would be a killer. But what I see is that they didn't know enough about how Envoys and those trained are set up with shields to aim at the right point," Jeff said. "In fact, I don't think they COULD aim at the right point because of the signature tags on the shields. Without the signature, which is specific to each individual, they wouldn't be able to get the trigger inside to drop the shield. Their thinking was that they could separate the shield from its power, but the power is from the individual. It's like needing to have billions of passwords to break into computers. Just isn't going to happen on a mass basis. But it would kill normals that don't have the signature tagged shields."

"OK, I'm passing this information on to the President," Melanie said. "I already know that we're going to need help in ending this farce. Oh! One other thing . . . have any of these devices already been sent out?"

“Not that I see,” Muriel said. “It’s still a prototype. And they’re trying to get separate manufacturers to create the parts, so no one knows what the end result would be.”

“Have they tested the prototype?” Melanie asked.

“Looking Nope. That’s the next step,” Muriel replied.

“Then we need to shut that down, NOW, before they test it and realize their mistake,” Melanie said.

“They WON’T realize their mistake, Melanie,” Jeff said. “They’d simply die. The trouble is that they’d kill anyone around the device, out to about a one hundred yard radius. It would also disrupt power – well, electricity – for the same area, which SHOULD shut down the device.”

“We still need to get in there and stop this before they try the demonstration,” Melanie said. “CIA was forbidden to run a research lab. I think that would be enough to shut it down.”

“How do you justify it?” asked Ted.

“NSA, in contract with the American Enclave, broke the coded message, at the request of the Secret Service,” Melanie replied with a grim smile. “Plus a lot of obfuscation and blather to make it look good. And I’m getting GOOD at obfuscation and blather. I’ll make it stick, or start arresting people that put up enough of a fuss trying to contest it.”

“Alright,” Muriel said, “who are the manufacturers that are making the parts? And, if this is a prototype, can we make the presumption that it’s only their R&D sections that would be producing the parts, and not the factories? And how many people would it be that we’d have to pick up from each company?”

“Ask your computer,” said Jeff, still looking at the plans. “Gad. They didn’t even keep it to a narrow focus, like a gun. This would radiate all over the area around them. Muriel, when you get through asking your computer what companies would be able to produce the parts at all, let’s ask it if it could show us what the device would look like if it were built. These are only schematics, not build drawings. No! Wait a minute. Oh, my”

“Oh, my, WHAT?” asked Muriel.

“I don’t need to ask,” Jeff replied. “And I know how they intend to get this out, and why they think it would work. These are actually light-bulbs, like you would put in a normal lamp. But not incandescent ones. Compact fluorescent lights. So, they’re intending to sell these, and get the general population to use them. Nasty. VERY nasty. And they haven’t got the size down far enough to be able to fit the circuitry in the base.”

“Why would they do that?”

"They think that they could use light as the carrier for the signal," Jeff said, "because light goes everywhere. So, OF COURSE, it must go through shields. It won't work. Or, not as they intend. In fact, I don't think there's any manufacturer that could miniaturize the circuitry to the point where it could be put in the base of a CFL light."

"How about as an adapter between the base of the bulb and the lamp?" asked Muriel.

"Now, that's a suggestion that I really wish you hadn't made, Muriel. Yea, they could do that, but it would have to lift the bulb up quite a bit," Jeff replied. "However, if they were to build this into the lamp, then they wouldn't need the adapter or need to monkey around with the CFL."

"But then, it wouldn't have as wide a distribution," Muriel said. "And, in any case, what you're telling me is that they don't even have a prototype model, yet. They're still in the drawing/design stage."

"Yep. That's the way I read this. They've got feelers out to companies, but nothing working, yet. And, I think you'd know immediately if anyone DID build one and try it," he replied.

"Why?"

"Because it would kill whoever turned it on and anyone within range of the light. And it would take someone with Envoy techniques to turn it back off," Jeff said. "So, even somebody passing by the room would get killed."

Chapter 10

The Light at the End of the Tunnel

(Wednesday afternoon, later)

"Melanie," Muriel asked, "do you know who this was sent from, and who to?"

"Not right off hand, but I can find out," she said. "Hold on." Melanie asked her phone for the source and destination of the file. "OK, yea. I've got names, and the computers that the file was sent from and too. NSA logged them. It only came to my attention when NSA couldn't break the code. I'd really like to know how your computer managed to do it."

"What type of computers does NSA have?" asked Jeff.

"Oh, normal desktop. Why?" asked Melanie.

"Because the difficult ones would require more computational ability than a normal desktop computer, or laptop, would have. So, these were sent using a public key/private key pair. NSA should have been able to crack it. Probably would have taken their computer most of the day to do it, though," Jeff replied, absently. "And, if Muriel's computer stored the keys, we could probably make modifications to the files that would cause the prototype to not even work, then send them back to the source. At the least, it would stall their research. Well, that's the theory, anyway, depending on what the actual correspondence was."

"Nice idea, but I don't think we want to rely on it," Melanie said. "I think our best bet is the direct approach. Just go in and shut down the lab and strip it. And arrest anyone in there. So, let me set up the obfuscation and blather to get a warrant, and to request the assistance of Home and the American Enclave. Give me a minute. I've got to make this sound REALLY good, in order to get the authorizations through without telling anyone what's REALLY in there."

"Melanie, when you grab the people in the lab, I want to talk to the inventor of this monstrosity," Jeff said. "There's some things in here that make me think he was trying to do something else, too."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because, it looks very much like he KNEW it wouldn't work the way they wanted it to," Jeff said, quietly. "In which case, you may not want to charge him along with the others."

"Melanie, let me get something straight, here," Muriel said. "CIA is closed down, isn't it?"

"Yep. The functions were transferred to Secret Service. NOBODY'S supposed to be in the building."

"OK," Muriel said, "Then it should be real easy to find out where the lab is, just by seeing where there's human activity. And, as for arresting these people, just say that this device would kill humans, and it was the intention of the political parties to use it that way."

"Why?"

"Because if we let out that they were trying to come up with a way to kill Envoys and those with Envoy training, I think we'd end up giving other people ideas," Muriel said. "And we really don't want to give them ideas that could lead to their actually devising something that would work. And we need to know everyone that have any copies of these drawings. And I think, if what Jeff said is true, that the inventor intended that anyone building and testing such a device would die. In which case he's right. We really need to talk to him."

"I'm going with you on the raid," Jeff said. "And I think this would be a good one for Marcia's team. Can you find out who the inventor is?"

"I suppose. At least, when we pick them up we should be able to find out," Melanie said.

"Then we definitely need Marcia's team. I don't think the inventor was asked, politely, to join their happy band. Which means that there may be family out there that could be in danger," Jeff replied.

"Oh, shit," Muriel said. "Sorry mom."

"Honey, I think this time the language was well justified," Lily said. "We certainly didn't mean to create this much trouble for you."

"Mom, you didn't," Muriel said. "In fact, you gave us the ability to see this coming and try to do something about it. But you might want to distance yourselves from the parties, now. Say your funds ran out, or something."

"I think, before we do that, we'll take your suggestion and see if any of our campaign workers were taking in any contributions without our knowing it," Lily said. "::Fran, can you find out some information for us?::

::Already working on it,:: their security chief said. ::And the answer is 'no'. It helps that you used your friends as campaign workers. Funds were offered, and they have the names of the people and companies that tried to contribute. We're collecting the information, now:::

::OK, when you get the information, initiate plan 'B', and get them out of there. Rooms are available at Guest House until the storm passes. And thanks, Fran:::

::My pleasure, Lily. Initiating plan 'B' for both campaigns now:::

"OK, honey, we're out of the race. Our campaign headquarters are being dismantled now, and the workers are coming into Guest House. We'd already set up with the manager,

there, so he knows what's happening. And Fran will have some information for you," Lily said. "We didn't take in any funds, but the campaign workers took names of those that tried to contribute. Fran has the names, or will have, shortly, and we'll get them to you."

"Lily," Mata said, "Give the names to me. I'll have the computer see if they're on this list, and what connections they may have." Lily passed the information to her, and it was only a few minutes before Mata came back with, "OK, we've got hits. Your potential contributors were from various businesses noted for their animosity toward us. And that's interesting! Emails from the businesses to the individuals offering the contributions show that they know you actually live in Enclave, and indicate that you may be trained. OH! That's why. Tracking further up, emails show that they wanted to use you as dupes – sacrifices, if you will – to show that Envoy trained people were getting into politics. And that they intended to have you killed by the device that Melanie dropped on us." Muriel nodded. Melanie looked stunned.

"WHAT! They wanted to kill them?" Melanie exclaimed.

"Yep. They also knew that they were Muriel's parents," Mata replied. "They intended it as a warning to her that she'd be next."

"And you're just nodding?" Melanie accused Muriel.

"Of course. I expected it. This has been building for a while. So that means that we need to pick up the businesses as well as the political parties," Muriel said. "Mata, these are electronics companies, aren't they? And they're contributing all the way up the line, and to both parties."

"As a matter of fact, yes. You suspect something?" Mata asked.

"I'd say it was a pretty strong suspicion," Muriel replied. "We hurt the electronics industry twice. Once by coming out with a car that didn't use any of their products for some of the fancy gadgets that they put in the cars, like satellite radio/CD players and emergency services that could detect a crash or give out directions. And second by coming out with computers and phones that undercut all their expensive hardware. However, I doubt that they are even the prime mover. Actually, we hurt businesses a third way, by telling them they had to stop contributing to political campaigns. I see they didn't stop."

"So, what you're saying is that we have to roll up the businesses?" asked Melanie.

"We could, but that might start another recession. It would definitely increase the unemployment level, dramatically," Muriel said. "No, we'll have to go for the policy makers in the companies and in the parties, and make an example of them."

"How?"

"Mata, check the other levels of political activity. I know we've got Envoy trained people that have been elected at other levels. See if you can find if they, too, are being targeted," Muriel asked as her only reply.

“Yes,” Mata said. “All of them. And all of them are Citizens of Home.”

“There's the why, Melanie. As for the how, I think it's time to start sending these people Home,” Muriel said. “Somebody has caught onto the fact that Envoy trained people are getting into politics, and that they are causing a disruptive situation to 'the way things were'. They aren't accepting bribes. They aren't initiating or voting for legislation that benefits business. In fact, just the opposite. They're advocating more transparency in politics, and better treatment of the middle and lower classes. And, since they couldn't be bought, now they want to eliminate them. That's making war on the Citizens of Home. And worse. It's terrorism. I take back what I said, earlier. We'll have to let people know that they were trying to build a weapon to target Envoys and those with Envoy training.”

“Um, Muriel?” Melanie said. “A lot of this information would be unusable as evidence.”

“You're right. But by the same token the people I'm supposed to protect are being targeted. Terrorism, Melanie. Home grown, American Terrorism. SOMETHING is going to have to happen. And, if I pick these bullies up, they're going home. And a lot of them may not be coming back. So, I guess you have a decision to make,” she replied. “THIS is what Homeland Security was supposed to be set up to do, and never really did do. So, figure out a way to deal with this situation, or I'll have to do what America threatened to do and never managed. I'll deal with it so that Envoy trained people – the Citizens of Home – are no longer targeted.”

“You're pushing, girl,” Melanie said.

“Damned straight I am,” Muriel replied. “We've got government bureaucracies that were poorly set up, poorly supervised, and ran amok. We closed them down, and the damned things STILL manage to bite us. Over and over again. We're not getting the people that are actually causing the problem. It's time we did. Notice, I said 'we'. We can help. Or, we can go in and unilaterally do it. And that's the beginning of your decision. The targeted people aren't just Citizens of Home. They're American citizens. They're the people that do ordinary jobs. Middle class people that are the foundation of the wealth of the country. The people that do things. And I'm an American citizen, and I've had enough. You are government – Secret Service and National Security Advisor. I'm a private citizen and an Ambassador. Together, we've done some impossible things. But we still haven't managed to shut down this network of 'good old boys' that wants to watch the world burn. That want to turn it into a feudalistic society with royalty – maybe not named as such but still royalty – and slaves.”

“Whoa! OK, OK, but what can we do?”

“Melanie, this is a cop function, not a political function. Think about it like that. How would you go after a gang in New York that was constantly causing violence, and funding their activities with selling drugs?” asked Muriel.

“Not her function, Muriel.” said a male voice.

"Hey! Henry! When did you get in?" asked Muriel.

"About a half hour ago, so I've heard a lot. Enough to know that there may be a way. Mata, can I see the list of those prime movers, and what you've got on them, please?" he asked. Mata handed him the list, then the background data that showed how dirty the people were. "You've got another list, too, don't you? The 'fellow travelers' and dupes? The workers that don't really know what's going on?" And Mata handed him a much longer list of people. "OK, we can do this. Melanie, it's up to you to finally shut down the Cesspool of Interfering Abominations once and for all. That CIA building is just sitting there, waiting to be used and misused. I think it's time to stop letting people use it."

"What are you planning on doing, Henry," asked Melanie.

"Arrest people," he replied. "There's enough, here, to support probable cause. Mata, is this the complete list of people that knew about the device and the intention to use it against trained people?"

"No, that's the top tier. The next two levels down we don't have hard evidence that they knew what was going on," Mata said. "Below that, the people were just clueless. Both ways."

"OK. I'll pick up the top, and we'll let the lower tiers know that they may be implicated in terrorist activities, and that they'll be on a watch list. That should cool them," Henry said. "Muriel, I think it's time to alert Marcia that you need to extract the inventor, and pick up anyone else in the CIA building as trespassers. If all else fails, and you can't identify the inventor, just bring them all out, and we'll sort it out later. Bring all equipment and information, too. Then destroy the building. It seems to be a magnet for subversive activities."

"Got it," Muriel said. "Marcia," she said and sent. "On deck. We've got a hot one for you. Terrorist activities, and one of them may be there unwillingly." And Marcia translated in.

"Where's my authorization?" she asked.

"Oh, here," Henry said, concentrated a second, then produced a page and signed it.

Marcia read it, then asked, "And the authorization to destroy a government building?"

"Hmm. You can't . . . ?"

"Nope. Destruction of government property. I need something to back it up. General Accounting Office would be all over us to pay for it, otherwise," Marcia said. "And I don't make THAT much money. And I can think of better uses for it than paying for something that I'll never use."

"I think I have a solution for that, Henry," Muriel said. "Just put an overcharged shield on it, with warning signs all around it. Somebody tries to get in, they get knocked on their butt

from the charge.”

“Could I ask you to see to that?” asked Henry. Muriel held out her hand. “Grrr,” grumbled Henry. “Doggone paperwork. OK, here,” he said, and again concentrated and produced a page that he signed.

“Good man. I KNEW you'd understand,” Muriel smiled. “OK, people, let's go to work.”

Chapter 11

A Collection of Top Hits

(Thursday morning)

It took the rest of Wednesday afternoon to set it up so that all the hits would happen at the same time. Once again, the warehouse prison would be populated by unpopular people, since there wasn't the space available in one place OTHER than there for the group. And there was no way that Henry was going to leave them in the states from which they were being pulled. Besides, Marcia, Tommy and crew needed the time to build the image of the CIA building, starting from a photograph and the imaging sent back by a stealthed squad. But once again, Tommy's imaging was spectacular, and they found where the lab was, and that it was occupied.

Thursday morning, the hits all went off at once. Henry's pickup of the top tier of the two political parties went off as a startling understatement. His crew simply translated in, arrested the individual, making sure that anyone in the area heard that it was for conspiracy to commit murder, then translated out with the cuffed individual. Melanie, in the mean time, was busy informing the President of what was happening, and why.

Marcia, though, had fun with hers. She took an FBI special agent with her crew, and stood him outside the building with orders not to move. Then she and her troops translated in, locking everyone in shields. It was a good thing they did. The inventor had reached the point of 'bread-boarding' the circuitry and was about to test it. Had he pushed the button, every normal in the room would have instantly died. Before they even translated the trespasser terrorists out of the room, Marcia had her troops translate everything in the room out – papers, CDs, equipment including computers, and the lashed together components that were supposed to be the test weapon. They were translated to a locked cell in the warehouse, thoroughly shielded so that nothing could get in without Marcia's key.

The people that had been in the building were extracted and brought to the FBI special agent for formal arrest. Then the perpetrators and inventor were translated to separate cells, and treated the same way that the other pickups had been treated. They were stripped and given the orange prison outfits that required them to use one hand to hold up their pants. All the cells were shielded in such a way that the Envoy guards could see in, but people in other cells couldn't. They also couldn't hear each other. This prison had been set up to make 'maximum security' appear to be a country club. It went way beyond maximum security and isolation.

Marcia was the last out of the building, after going all over it to be sure everyone was out. From outside, with the help from Envoys from Home, she created an overpowered shield that would keep anyone from even touching the building, and posted large warning signs every fifty feet around it. She knew it wouldn't stop people from trying, but it WOULD stop people from succeeding. Again, she locked the shields and signs with her key, so they couldn't be bypassed. When she translated back to Enclave, she handed Mata the record of what had been done.

Jeff hadn't gone on the raid. But he was in the warehouse prison when the inventor was translated in. And after the formalities of processing him were finished, Jeff went in to talk to him.

"Hey, bud. What the heck were you doing?" Jeff asked.

"What I was ordered to do," the man replied.

"Why?"

"Because they're holding my parents. They said that if I didn't help them, my parents would die. I'm not even sure they're still alive," the man said. "It's been two weeks, and I haven't been allowed to be in contact with them. At all."

"Well, maybe we can do something about that," Jeff said, and alerted Marcia to what he'd said. "So, what was that thing you had bread-boarded?"

"It was supposed to kill Envoys and anyone with Envoy training. It wouldn't have worked, though," the man said.

"Oh? Why?"

"Two reasons. Look, I know you're trained," he said. "And I know that you've got a shield – well, at least one – on you right now. If you built that shield, and I know you did, then it's keyed to you. The only way anyone could have penetrated it would be to have that key. So, I might be able to build a device that would do it, but it wouldn't have any effect on anyone else. So it would be useless for their purposes. That's the first thing. The second thing is that, the way I designed and built it, it would have killed anyone without the training and shields. Including me. I couldn't let them actually do anything to you people. And without knowing if my parents were still alive, I had to presume that they weren't. Not after this long."

"So, how come you know so much about it?" asked Jeff.

"Oh, I have a friend that's trained. He was telling me about it. Telling me what the training covered, things like that," the man said. "I was considering taking it, myself, when I got snatched. Right out of my home. Mom and dad were grabbed at the same time. I wish I'd never gotten into electronics."

"Well," Jeff said, "it's possible that one of my friends could find your parents and get them out of there. But we'd have to have some information from you so we could locate them."

"You really think you could find them?"

"It's a distinct possibility. Would you like me to call that friend?" asked Jeff.

"Man, if you could get them free But what's the point. They'd just get grabbed again," the man said.

"Not the way we do it. For one thing, my friend would pick up whoever is holding them, too, and turn them over to the police for kidnapping. That's still a Federal charge," Jeff said, "and we know a couple of FBI agents that might take an interest in it. And your parents would be put up in our Guest House, where they'd be well protected. In fact, if everything checks out, we could probably spring you, too. Certainly, we'd see to it that you were able to be in contact with them."

"If they're alive," the man said.

"So, let's start with the idea that they are. Let me call my friend, and maybe we can get the information to find them. OK?" asked Jeff.

"Yea, sure," the man said, still despondent.

::Marcia, do you want to do it, or do you want one of your troops to find out who he is and who his parents are?: Jeff sent.

::I'll do it. Coming in.: And Jeff stood by as she set the shield on the cell to admit him.

"Hi! My name is Marcia, and I'm head of the Hostage Rescue and Recovery team for Home. Oh," she added, "I'm human, and so is my team. I CAN call Envoys when I need to, but the actual work is done by my team and I."

"You're kidding! You can't be any older than HE is," the man said, pointing to Jeff.

"You're right. However, my team and I have had some special training. Oh, and this might help you understand," Marcia said, pulling out her passport hand handing it to him. His eyes got wide when he saw her pull it out of a 'no pocket' – seemingly out of thin air. But when he read the certification inside he was really stunned.

"Ambassador? And Citizen of Home? And all these other certifications including the Navy Seals? You've GOT to be kidding!"

"Nope. Oh, Jeff is an Ambassador, too," she said.

"Yea, I figured that, from the uniform," he said. "But your's is different. The pants are the same. Kinda a gray color. But the jacket looks like wet blood!"

"Yep. We've been blooded," Marcia said, smiling. "We've done things that put us up against armed people. Our picking you up – oh, and the other people in that lab – was just the latest thing. Look, we're going to need some information from you. To start, it would help if we knew your name. Then we need an image of your parents."

"Me, I'm Jack Thompson. But I'm afraid I don't have any pictures of my parents," he

said.

“Relax, Jack. We can cover that in a minute. Just hold on.” Then, she said and sent, “Team, we’ve got a live one. Hostage rescue. Henry, I need authorization and an agent to do the arrests. Fran, can I borrow one of your squad? There may be injuries.”

Fran was first to respond, translating into the cell. “No sweat. Things are light right now, and it’s early enough that Mark can cover. I’ll go with you.”

“And I’ll be with you to do the paperwork,” Henry said, translating in behind her. And outside the cell were six kids in dark red tunics and gray pants, just waiting for the word from Marcia.

“GEEZ! You people don’t fool around. And all kids?” asked Jack.

“Nope,” Henry said. “I’m an old fogey. Just along to lend an imitation of order to this troop of yahoos,” he added, and showed his FBI identification.

Tommy came up to the front of the cell and asked, “Marcia, can you let me in? I need to get images. You can grab and send to others to store.” And a second later, this unassuming young man stepped into the cell and walked up to Jack. “Jeff, I may need some support to keep from hurting him.” Then to Jack, “My name is Tommy, and I’m a philosopher. Don’t let that scare you,” he said, with a chuckle. “I can be as ruthless as Marcia or as gentle as Muriel. What I’m here for is to get your images of your parents, so we can locate them. It might hurt a little, but I’ll try to be gentle, and Jeff will help. If he notices that you’re feeling pain at all, he can help buffer it, and supply you with the power to keep it away. What I want you to do is to think of your parents. What they look like. Oh, one at a time, please. I’ll pass the images to Marcia, and she’ll pass them to the rest of the troops.”

“This is a kind of mind reading, isn’t it?” asked Jack.

“Yes. And the reason it could hurt a little is because you’ll be trying to push the images to me, and you don’t really have the power to do it,” Tommy said. “I won’t actually be reading your mind or anything. So, nothing private. I’ll just be trying to pick up the image you are pushing to me. OK?”

“Yea, I guess so. I’ll try, anyway,” Jack said. “First my mother,” and he closed his eyes and an intense look of concentration was on his face.

“Good! Got it,” Tommy said.

“And so do the troops,” Marcia added. “Good image.”

“OK, then my father,” Jack said, and repeated the process.

“Very good! That’s it. Any pain?” asked Tommy.

"A little at first, then it faded, and seemed easier," Jack replied.

"And another good image," Marcia said. "OK, troops. Anybody got a lock on them?"

"Yea. They're moving. Looks like they're running for an airport. Back lot?"

"Yep. Shields, first. Lock them down. Let's go," Marcia said, then they all blinked out but Jeff.

"How are you doing, Jack?" he asked.

"Fine, now. Worried, of course. Mom's got diabetes. Dad's got a heart condition. Neither of them could have stood up to much."

"Well, We'll take care of them. Don't worry." A muffled thump came from outside. "Geez! That was close. They must have dropped it behind the offices."

"What?"

"Oh, the truck," Jeff said. "They probably pancaked it into the dirt behind our offices, which are right across the street."

"Right across the . . . where ARE we?" asked Jack.

"Envoy Enclave, outside Phoenix, Arizona," Jeff replied "I guess your friend didn't tell you ALL about the training. We can go from one place to another just by imaging where we want to be."

::Marcia,:: Fran sent, ::unlock the cage::

::You got it,:: she sent back.

"And NO MORE INSULIN!" Fran's voice came from the hallway. "Sheesh! You scared the heck out of me. You don't need it any more. I corrected the condition that caused the diabetes. Honest. How about you, sir? Feeling better now?" The voice had gotten closer, and three people entered the front of the cell. Two immediately rushed to Jack.

"Jeff, can you train?" asked Fran.

"I . . . yea, sure! But why?"

"They all three need it. Jack is the closest. But his parents are not far behind him. I'll see if Muriel and Don can help. I haven't done it that much," Fran said. "Maybe Muriel would monitor me, this time."

"First, we've got to get their permission," Jeff reminded her.

"I don't think that will be a problem. Look at them. I know you've had some experience with seeing people that were about ready to connect. Just let me get Don and Muriel in here, if I can," Fran said. ::Don? Muriel? Can you help? We've got a family that's about ready to connect.::

"What? Where?" Muriel came storming in . . . and stopped. "Oh. Yea, I guess they are. Thoroughly stressed, too. Look, let's get them over to Guest House and calmed down, then we can see what we can do. I wonder if the manager has a couple of suites that join."

"Of course I do. And they've got them," he said, with a grin, then translated back out.

"You know, sometimes the helpfulness around here is unnerving," Muriel said. "Anyway," she added, and turned to the family, "folks, my name is Muriel. Welcome to Enclave. Because of the circumstances, we'd like to have you as our guests for a couple of days. That would give you the chance to catch up with each other, and calm down after your ordeal. Now, ordinarily I wouldn't add to your stress, but I think your young inventor should get someplace where he can change clothes. So we're going to translate you directly to your rooms. Jeff, would you go with the young man, please?"

"Yep. On it. Got the room number. OK Jack Thompson, let's go for a little trip. Your parents will be right next door when you're changed, then we can talk," Jeff said, and they translated out.

"Do you people do that all the time? Popping in and out like that? Oh, sorry, I'm Dennis Thompson. My wife, Patricia," Dennis said.

"Hi, Dennis, Patricia. Yea, pretty much. Saves travel time, and much of the time we're pressed for time to get things done," Muriel said. "But that's us. There are thousands of people that have the training that don't have the situation we have. So, let's get you to your room so your son can join in the discussion." And she translated them to their room, and Fran and Don joined them.

Chapter 12

Connections, Connections, Connections

(Thursday morning, later)

“Who ARE you people?” asked Patricia.

“Kids,” Muriel said. “Kids with some special training and some education. Wait a minute. I think your son is coming, and we can do the introductions, then.” A knock at the door, and Dennis opened it to find his son, back in his regular clothes, and Jeff.

When they were in and seated, Muriel went on. “There are thirteen of us kids that pretty much run the place, with the administrative help of a middle aged man. You'll meet him – Ted – later. But for now, Jeff is our engineer and computer programmer, head of – what is it? Six car companies, now?”

“Eight. You forgot Russia and China,” Jeff said. “Plus I do some ancillary work in programming and electronics, and head up three software companies, now.”

“OK. Next to him is Don, our trainer, troublemaker and bat boy. Don't let the titles fool you. In addition to being the best trainer in Enclave, he's also an educator – a teacher. He teaches history to kids all over the area. His girlfriend, Fran, the young lady in white, is a Doctor of Envoy medicine.”

“And what about you?” asked Dennis.

“Oh, I just kind of loaf around and let everybody else do the work,” Muriel said, grinning.

“Translation,” said Don, “she's the Leader of Home and Ambassador to the people of earth, and the reason that the other twelve of us are here. We were her friends for a long time, then she started getting trained, and brought us out. We ended up being trained and listed as Ambassadors, too.” By this time, the Thompsons' jaws had dropped. Don calmly ignored the expressions and added, “Now, about the training. We've had people take as long as four days . . . ,” and he continued with the litany of what it was, what to expect, and the fact that they were already guests and their stay wouldn't cost them anything.

“But,” he added, “we can't force you to be trained. WE think that you're close to what we call 'breakthrough', though, and it would be easier on you if you let us help. Now, would you like us to go away for a while so you can discuss this and come to your own decisions?”

Dennis looked at his wife and son. At nods from each of them, he turned back to Don. “I think we'd like to try. You say it can help us, and right now I think we need all the help we can get.”

“OK, well let me give you a little background on the training and what Envoys are and

how they fit in the situation,” Don said. “To begin with, Envoys are pure soul – intelligent power is perhaps a better way of describing it. Humans, of course, are a soul in a physical body” And all three people went into contact shock. Fran checked each of them, to make sure there weren't any problems, then went back beside Don and waited. After a couple of minutes, they all three were out of it and looking around with 'new eyes'.

“I think I'm glad we were all sitting down for that,” Dennis said. “What was that?”

“Your mind connected to the Envoy soul,” Muriel said. “So, now you have a lot more experiences to draw on, as well as abilities you didn't have before. We'll run you through some things so you are familiarized with the way they are done today, but that won't take long – maybe an hour or two. Along with it, we'll give you some explanations for some of it, and an idea of what else goes with the training.”

“Jack, I'm going to tell you something that I didn't, before. I KNEW that your device wouldn't work the way it was touted to work. As Muriel said, I'm an electronics engineer, and saw your drawings. I'm very glad you didn't throw that switch. But I understand why you'd intended to. As a double-check, when I was buffering you and providing you with power while you were feeding Marcia the images of your parents, I checked your balance, and it was good. No, I didn't read your mind. The balance appears to different people in different ways. For me, it's like a meter with 'B' on one side and 'W' on the other. Most humans fall somewhere in the middle. You were actually more on the 'W' side than most. So, you were a victim, and not a willing conspirator. But I'd already figured that out from the drawings. Does that make sense?”

“Yea. I didn't think I could hide it from an engineer. But those people didn't have the sense to check what I did with another engineer,” Jack said.

“Actually, it was probably that they didn't want another engineer to know what you were working on,” Muriel said.

“Well, whatever. Though I had hoped that another engineer would see the drawings and realize that I was in trouble. And maybe a lot of other people, too,” Jack said. “The trouble is, that it COULD be made to work, but only if the operator knew the signature of the shields he was up against. Which, of course, would mean that he'd have to be trained. And I didn't know that part of it, then, though I suspected it.”

“OK, well, we're going to shelve it, and destroy all record of it on earth. Home will have a record, in case we ever run into anything like it, again,” Muriel said. “But, hopefully, this will be the last time that people will have the stupidity to do something like this. In the mean time, let's finish your training so we can all go to lunch.”

Training took an hour and a half – and LOTS of questions. By this time the family had calmed down a lot, and were beginning to have fun with their new abilities. Oh, and they all found out why one of Don's titles was bat boy, and got a chuckle out of that. Some of the questions had to do with education, and Don gave them a short demonstration of what he did with kids that DIDN'T have the training or even the mental link. Some of the questions had to

do with Muriel's friends, and what they did in or for Enclave. Marcia popped in about that time and introduced herself, and explained what she and six others did, and why.

"Of course," Muriel added to her friend's explanation, "the reason for the red tunic is so that she shows up better on television." Marcia hit her.

"Seriously, it's so that we stand out on a job. If we have to go in with other people, Police, Fire, Coast Guard, something, then we want them to know who we are and where we are," Marcia said. "We could have used the ordinary Enclave uniforms, but then we'd be suggesting that any of our friends could do the same things that we do. Well, they could, after a lot of extra training and conditioning and IF they wanted to. Yea, we represent Enclave and Home. But we also represent ourselves."

"Yea, but why that shade of red?" asked Jack.

"Oh, that. It's her fault," Marcia said, pointing to Muriel. "You should see her in a formal uniform. Especially the kilt version of it."

"You ever notice that everything around here is MY fault?" Muriel said, and changed to formal kilts.

"WHOA! OK, I think I get the point," Jack said.

"Maybe. It's the blood stripe – the thin, red line. It indicates that I've seen armed combat. You want to know how strong your shields are?" She went over to a computer and turned it on, then faced the monitor toward the Thompsons. "This happened at an arms demonstration that didn't go the way the arms manufacturers thought it would." And she played the record of the event. Just before the chain bomb portion, Muriel said, "Ware the loud noises." And the bomb wrapped around her and went off. After a minute, the smoke and dust cleared to show an unharmed girl.

"Who was that?" asked Dennis.

"Oh," Marcia said, casually, "that was her. Showing off again. We were twelve, then, and she was our mother – the one we went to when we were in trouble or had a problem, or just needed to cry. And then she brought us out here, and we stopped crying. Well, most of us did. We also stopped knuckling under to bullies. Muriel's been making a target of herself since she came out here. She keeps saying that a leader is someone that's being chased. Either because people like the way she's going and follow her, or they don't like the way she's going and are trying to kill her."

"Before you ask, no, you won't have to wear a uniform," Muriel said. "That started as a way of making us distinctive – of advertising the fact that we'd been trained. Not even all Ambassadors wear uniforms, and certainly, those that do, they're nothing like ours. Now, how about we go to lunch." ::Ted, gang, lunch. Sam's:: A chorus of OKs followed, and Muriel translated people out.

As they filed into the reserved room at Sam's, Muriel spotted a green uniform. "Taylor, you clown. What are YOU doing here? Slumming again?" she hollered across the room.

"Have to keep an eye on the colonies, dontchaknow," he said in the fake British snob accent. Then switching, he said, "Besides, it's only six PM for me. Just time for an early dinner. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not hardly," Muriel replied. "We don't get to see enough of you. Anything in particular bring you over?"

"Nope. Even colonels get vacation, sometimes. Sid's in charge, still fuming about an honest sergeant being made a major. But it's all an act. You should see him leading the troops out, grinning like a Cheshire cat. He loves it," Taylor replied.

"You're military?" asked Patricia.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Taylor, these are the Thompsons. We just saved them from a fate worse than kidnapping and other terrorist activities, and they just got connected," Muriel said. "Jack, Dennis, Patricia," she added, pointing to each, "This is his Royal Highness Taylor, Prince of the Realm, Ambassador to the people of Britain, and Colonel in Chief of the Regiment of Home – otherwise known as the Jolly Greens."

"Hi. Glad to meet you," said Taylor. Then turned to Muriel and said, "Do I need to start dragging out the 'Madam Ambassador' now? You KNOW I hate all the formality unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Taylor, they never would have believed it if I hadn't told them."

"Yea, well then you might as well introduce that vagabond at the other end of the table, too, then," Taylor said.

"Ah, yes. We can't forget Ted. Thompsons, meet the man that keeps Enclave running while I'm running around. Ted doesn't have a last name. In fact, Ted IS his last name. His first name is 'Heyyou'," Muriel said.

"Not that vagabond, Muriel. The OTHER one – the red-headed Cossack that's trying to hide on his right, so you won't send her to bed," Taylor said.

"Anna? Girl, it's WAY past your bedtime. What are YOU doing here?"

"Mostly, being outrageous. Somebody leaked a video of my squads and I dancing and riding. So, we've been hitting various cities around the world. For some reason, people love me," Anna said.

"Well, in that case, Thompsons, meet Anastasiya Khmelnytsky, Zaporozhtsi Cossack and Ambassador to the people of Russia. The youngest Ambassador that Home has, and very likely the toughest."

"Why do you say that?" asked Patricia.

"Anna learned to dance and ride the same way any normal person would learn – by getting in and doing it through long hours of painful practice," Muriel said. "And that's the way she performs. She doesn't use Envoy techniques to support her. She's simply good." She turned back to Anna and asked, "So, what are you raising money for?"

"Oh, I took a tip from Ted and started looking at the companies in Russia that are trying to drive our society," Anna said. "It was a bit of an eye-opener. Fortunately, I've got friends that are trained, and I can trust them to hold things down or holler for help, so I can see about raising enough to try to buy them. At least WE know who, in general, is running them. Of course, finding out the specifics is an exercise for my new analysis team. So, anyway, I'm over here, showing off and making money like crazy, even after the outrageous prices of renting a place to perform."

"Anna," Ted said, "If you need help with it, let me know. One way or another we'll make sure you have the money you need to pull it off."

"Thanks, Ted," she replied. "I'll keep it in mind. But it looks like we've got it covered, so far. Besides, the Russian mob is having so much fun trying to find ways to get hold of the money we're making. Of course, every try they take, they expose a bit more of their organization. We may not have to pay as much for the companies as I originally thought. Especially if we just roll the whole thing up."

"So, why DID you call this lunch," asked Taylor.

"Because it wasn't breakfast?" quipped Muriel.

"Goof. Really, what's up?"

"Oh, we just connected three new trainees, and they're very confused right now about what they can do, and what we can do. Basically, they need friends," Muriel said. "So I thought I'd introduce them to MY friends, and let them see that we aren't all quasi-military people. Even among Marcia's merciless band." And with that, she started her friends on introducing themselves and talking a bit about where their interests were. When the introductions got around to Jeff, Muriel finally figured out why he had so many degrees.

"Basically, I had an idea that shields could do more than just protect. And I was right. Think about it. In the basic training, we learn to make shields that protect. Then we learn to make them into clothes that actually fit. Pens. Pads of paper to write on. Don's baseball bat," that brought a chuckle. "So I started with mechanical things, and began to realize that shields were more than what they seemed. Then I turned to electronics. Jack, you've seen the computer in your room, and in your parents' room. There's no electronics as you know it in those computers. They're ALL shields. Semi-intelligent shields that can do more than any earthly computer."

“Yes, and medicine is much the same way,” Fran piped up. “I take energy and turn it into living flesh, to repair what is banged up or not working right in a person. And I didn't realize what it was that I was doing until recently, because it was all done subconsciously.”

“And,” Don added, not to be outdone by his girlfriend, “to top it off, you can take an image and turn it into shields, and using the ideas Jeff came up with, have figures walking around and talking. They're not real people – they follow a set script. But they're how I manage to teach history to grade school kids without using a mental link.”

“And an extension of that is how we know where people are, so we can rescue them,” Marcia said. “Right down to what are we going to be facing when we go in. It makes it easier to know where the 'bad guys' are, and lock them in shields so we can go in and do what we came to do.”

“Everything builds on what came before,” Taylor said. “I got into this early. And I was outrageous. So, I had my troops riding horses that weren't there. It was so outrageous that they were grinning during their first 'trooping the colors' for the Queen. And the media ate it up, and started calling us the 'Jolly Greens'. I detect a possible vegetable joke in their reference, but if there was, it was quickly ignored in favor of what we could do. Education is another area that's been expanded. My regiment is made up entirely of officers. WORKING officers. If they aren't willing to get in and get their hands dirty, then they're out. They are expected to think, and not just follow orders.”

“And then, there's Carla,” Muriel said. “She was fascinated by fashion and design. That led her into not only learning about clothing, but architecture for interior design. And, as a result, she's designed and built, or supervised the building of some absolutely unreal buildings out of shields. Clothing is the same way – boy, that takes us right back in a circle, doesn't it. Well, the point is that everything that we come up with is sent back to Home, and all the Envoys are able to make use of the information or pass it on to trained people.”

“We've turned a number of areas on their heads,” Ted said. “Buildings that don't need maintenance. Roads and bridges that never wear out. Electronics that isn't electronics. Cars that don't break down or need gas. Power stations that supply not only electricity, but fresh water, and take in sewage and eliminate it. Power and shields, and whatever our minds can come up with.”

“Begin to understand what you've stumbled into?” asked Muriel. “Envoys, as a whole, aren't creative. We are. We have to be, just to stay alive. And slowly, as we go along, Envoys are becoming creative in their own right. They now have artists – or at least they're trying to create art. Chefs, well, you've been enjoying the work of one of them, and as you go around Enclave you'll have the opportunity to experience more.”

“The down side of all of this,” Muriel continued, “is that it's a disruptive situation. Humans were left so long without supervision – yea, we were meant to be supervised – that things like greed and bullying entered into the picture. What this Enclave does, for the most part, is try to clean up that mess. And you three just happened to be caught up in that. But that can't happen again to you. Now, you've got protection you can trust, and a way to holler

for help that the 'bad guys' don't even know about. You've also got a safe place”

“Several, actually,” Anna put in.

“Yea. Several safe places you can go, just to visit or to take you out of the line of fire,” Muriel went on. We can even provide education in whatever interests you, or even just to improve your lives. Any Enclave you enter will treat you as honored guests, simply because you have the training. You won't pay for anything that's made in Home or any Enclave. And that includes food, shelter, clothing design, medicine, entertainment and education. Nothing. Oh, and you can train others in the Envoy techniques. Though you might want help or at least monitoring at first, until you're comfortable doing it. We even have some job opportunities. Jack, you might want to talk to Jeff about that. OK?”

“Very,” Jack said. “I think I'd like that.”

“Good. Then take a few days to look around and ask questions. Give us a chance to make sure we've cleaned up this mess that you found yourself in, and get comfortable with your new training.”

Chapter 13

The Real Reasons

(Thursday afternoon)

"We're people," Muriel said to Jack as they started to exit the restaurant. "Just like you. We have parents and bodies, and sometimes are confused by things going on around us, and sometimes need help."

"Mommy! Look! It's them!" a little girl said as they left the building.

"No, dear. It's probably just some people they hired to look like them, to advertise the toys," the mother said.

"Uh, uuuh" the girl sing-songed back. "Look! It's really her. She's in a different uniform, but it's the same girl that dances." And she was pointing at Anna.

Anna looked at Muriel, then looked back at the young girl. "OK, people, give me some room," and Muriel and her friends spread out in a large circle. A five minute demonstration that had the mother's eyes wide pretty much answered the question. But it was at the end when she switched from her everyday uniform to the full formal 'Hetman' uniform that the woman's jaw dropped. "Yep. It's me," Anna grinned and turned to the little girl.

"Zdravstvujtye, young lady," Anna said, dropping into the same squat that she used for dancing. "You like dancing?"

"Uh, huh. Are you really Russian?"

"Oh, yes. And I was born and raised in the same part of the country that my dancing and riding come from," Anna replied. "And I grew up wanting to be a Cossack. Then I did some studying, and discovered that I actually was one. A friend of mine taught me a little of how to dance like that. Then, I met that lady over there," she said, pointing to Muriel, "and she made it possible for me to learn to dance even better."

"How did you make your uniform change?" asked the girl.

"Oh, this?" she said, switching back to the everyday uniform. "That's part of what that lady taught me. But that takes some special training." ::Muriel, I think she's ready to connect,:: Anna sent. ::But I detect resistance on the part of the mother. I think she's afraid she can't afford it.::

"I heard that," the little girl said. "Mommy says that we can't afford a lot of things. What's 'connect'?"

"Honey! I told you, it's not nice to do that!"

"Actually, it's very nice," Muriel said. "But it does mean that she needs to learn some control. We'd be happy to teach her. We could teach you, too, so you'd understand what your daughter is going through."

"Oh, we couldn't do that," the woman said. "It's"

"Training doesn't cost anything," Ted gently interrupted as the woman searched for a word. "Why don't you come with us to our offices, and we can tell you all about it. Tell you what," he went on, "since we'd be taking up some of your time with your daughter, we'll even put you up in a room for the night, so you can see more of Enclave and get to know us. It's really no trouble for us."

"Oh, I couldn't. We couldn't. I mean . . . we're just ordinary people. We can't afford things like that," the woman said, and looked to be getting ready to same more in the same vein.

"Neither could my parents, when I was twelve," Muriel stopped the flow of words. "But I was able to be trained, anyway. Same with Anna, the young girl that your daughter is fascinated with. Her father had just been fired. Well, he's got work, now, as head of the plant that fired him. WE own the plant, and the training we gave him, along with his daughter, made it possible for him to take over the position with no trouble. Anna, why don't you show her your passport. I don't think she'd believe me."

Anna did just that, drawing it out of a 'no pocket' as the girl watched with VERY wide eyes. Anna just grinned at her. Then, she passed it up to the girl's mother, whose eyes got even wider when she realized that the young dancer in front of her was an Ambassador to Russia.

"We could even take them to MY office," Anna said, "and train her there, if you like."

"What? NO! We could never afford to go to Russia," the woman said. "Disturb an Ambassador? That wouldn't be proper!"

"Well, actually, we have a lot of Ambassadors. In fact," Muriel said, "you're surrounded by them, right now. Except for those three, over there, that are new trainees. And, since some of us are a little higher in rank than the others, we have the right, and the ability, to help you in any way we can. And it's no trouble for us. Just think of it as winning the lottery."

"You're ALL Ambassadors?" the woman asked, as she handed Anna's passport back.

"Uh, huh," Muriel said, and pulled out hers. "This is where the training started. In fact, I was he first to be trained, here," she added, as the woman's eyes widened again. "We're just ordinary people, doing a job, you know. Nobody special."

"How can you say you're not special? You're Ambassadors!" the woman exclaimed.

"Oh, that's just a job we do. It isn't who we are. Sure, it takes training. So does any

job. Just something we try to do to the best of our ability. And we have lots of help doing it," Muriel said. "But the training we're offering is free, and not for any job. Just something that can help you in your lives. There's no catches to it. This is training that everyone was originally meant to have, so we're putting it out there for people."

"But . . . I mean Don't you have important work to do?" she asked.

"Sometimes I have work that takes me away from my first and most important task – training people. Time sensitive work, or things that involve protecting people. But when that happens, I have a LOT of people to draw on that are as good or better than I am to help me," Muriel said. "And they keep telling me that I'm not giving them enough to do. So, it doesn't HAVE to be me that trains you or your daughter. But yes, barring emergencies, I'm available, too, and I enjoy training people."

"Um . . . will it hurt?" the woman asked.

"Short answer, yes. Long answer, it may hurt some, before somebody can buffer it and take the pain away. But that's brief and doesn't hurt much, and only occurs at one point in the training, right near the beginning. After that, no more pain," Muriel said. "The reason that it hurts is that, at first, you don't have the power to be able to support the effort. Once you have the power – and that's the first thing we teach you to find – the situation goes away. The rest is just learning applications of how to use the power. We've taught numerous adults and young adults with no problem, right down to eleven or twelve years of age. One of them is squatting there, talking with your daughter. The youngest we've taught was six, and we didn't give her the complete training. In fact, she's just starting to learn phase three, now, at age ten. We won't go beyond what a person is mentally capable of doing."

"As a matter of fact," Don piped up, "You could even say that there is no pain with one method of training, but there is a shock to the system. One method provides a person with all the basis of the training at once. In fact, we did it with that six year old Muriel mentioned, and were still able to limit her development of the training to what was appropriate for her age and mental development."

"Hi, Don. Hi, Muriel," said a young voice, just barely arriving before a four foot mass struck Don amidships.

"OOF! Hi to you, too, Hanna. We were just talking about you," Don said.

"Oh, you've got another one, like me," she said. "And her momma is worried for all the wrong reasons," she added.

"Oh?" asked Muriel.

"Yea. She's worried about social things like her just being people and you being an Ambassador," Hanna replied with the wisdom of youth. "But that's not the way you are. You're just people, and always want to help other people." She turned to the woman and said, "Hi, I'm Hanna. And I've got some of the training. My mom and dad took the whole

thing, but I'm not old enough to do some of the things alone. Don and Brenda helped me to learn. Is Muriel going to help you learn? She's good!"

"Who is Brenda?" asked the woman.

"I am," Brenda said, just arriving. "Sorry, Muriel. She got away from me before I realized where she was headed."

"Oh, that's no problem. Hanna's always good, if a little overpowering, sometimes," Muriel grinned.

"You don't look old enough to take care of a child. Are you her sister?" the woman asked.

"No, mommy," said the little girl, losing interest in Anna. "She's an Envoy. You can tell 'cause she's white and bright. The rest are just people, 'cause they're gray and not as bright."

"Brenda is my guardian. Not like a mother or father type guardian. She keeps me from doing more than I can do at a time, and helps teach me. And she protects me," Hanna said.

"Hey, gang, how about we go back to our offices and let these people sort it out, huh?" asked Carla. The rest quickly translated out, Don and Fran saying that they would stay available.

"I'm staying," Taylor said. "I wouldn't miss this for anything."

"I'd like to stay, if I might," Anna said. "I'm not expected back home until tomorrow night, and no more shows for a while."

"Um"

"Nope, Thompsons. You're staying. We've still got things to go over. And we can sort this all out, pretty quickly, I think," Muriel said.

"Why don't I take the Thompsons," Ted said. "I think I know what you were going to go over. And if not, Bart knows. They'll be fine. That is, if they don't mind"

"No, that's fine," Jack said. "Whatever works." His parents nodded their agreement. And they and Ted translated to his office.

"My office is just around the corner a little ways," Muriel said, softly. "You haven't told me your name. What would you like me to call you?"

"Oh . . . Cynthia, I guess," she said.

"Well, Cynthia, everyone here – everyone you've met, is a protector. And you've got a lot of fear about something, and that disturbs me a bit," Muriel went on, still in that soft, quiet

voice she had. "Now, I know – when I first met Ted – that I was suspicious and worried. But it was nothing like you seem to be going through. Now, I may be young, but I've gone through a lot and seen a lot. And right off hand, I'd say you were running from something. Whatever it is, I'd like to help you. Will you let me help you? Please?"

"I . . . you wouldn't understand," she said.

"Maybe. But it's definite that I won't if you don't tell me. But that wouldn't stop me from helping you," Muriel said.

"There's nothing you can do! He's after me, and he'll find me," she said.

"OK. Now, this is an Embassy. The whole Enclave is the Embassy. All you have to do is say, 'I request asylum'," Muriel said. "You say that, and no one can take you or your daughter out of here against your will."

"I request asylum," she said.

"Good. That takes care of the technicalities," Muriel said. "So you're covered. You can relax. You are now a Guest of Home. And believe me, we have ways to protect you that you can't even imagine. Just through those doors and we turn left." Anna trotted ahead and caused the doors to whoosh open and stay there. This woman – Cynthia – didn't need any more trauma in her life. "Thanks, Anna."

"OK, so, sit down and relax. Who is after you?" asked Muriel. Cynthia just looked at her daughter.

"Muriel," Hanna suddenly interrupted, "why don't I take this young lady back to the break room and get her a snack." Muriel looked at her, puzzled. ::I don't think she wants to talk about it in front of her daughter,:: Hanna sent.

"Sounds like a good idea. And you know the people in my squads. Introduce her around," Muriel said, smiling.

When she turned back to Cynthia, the woman said, "They said I'd married him. But I didn't! I'd have remembered something like that! All I know is that he was constantly after me, forcing me to have sex with him. When my daughter was born, it got a little better, but he was still after me for sex. Finally, when Ruth was four, I found a way to escape and take her with me. No money, of course. People helped me along the way. But he followed me. Always after me. A truck driver gave us a lift to here, and said to come talk to you." She finally ran down, thoroughly despondent.

"Mata?"

"On it. OH! She's got two Envoys on her. They've been keeping him distracted. But he's heard about Enclave and is headed this way," Mata said.

"Any chance we can get the Envoys in here, and get an image on him for Bob's guys?" asked Muriel.

"They sent the image ahead, but they're on their way. OH! Soul so gray it might as well be black," Mata said. "Bob's guys have the image and signature. What do you want done with him?"

"Arrest him for disturbing the peace, and I'll take care of it, later. We need to find out if he has any next of kin," Muriel said, grimly.

Suddenly, two Envoys appeared at Mata's desk. "Get rid of the beards," Muriel said, "then come in and sit down. I take it that you are the two that have been shepherding Cynthia and her daughter?"

"Yes, ma'am. We managed to distract him at the truck stop, long enough for her to get a ride with a trucker. We planted the idea of dropping her off here, hoping you could help," one of them said.

"She's helped. And in a short while, he's going to take a little trip. And from the sound of it, it may be a one-way trip," Muriel said. "Marcia, can you come in here?" she said and sent.

"Yep. OH! The missing two. Where's the man, do you know?" Marcia asked.

"Headed this way. Bob's guys are on the alert for him," Muriel replied.

"OK, I'm going to ask my troops to assist with that. He was one of the ringleaders, and most abusive, from the records we have. But he, and they, weren't in the compound when we got there. Runner?" asked Marcia.

"Yep. And terrorized. If you have a name and next of kin, it would be helpful," Muriel replied.

"Oh, sure. Hold on. OK, Mata and Bob have the name. No known next of kin," Marcia said.

"Oh, oh! Bob says that Marcia's red shirts are bringing him here," Mata said.

"Just keep him outside the doors," Muriel responded. "I'll deal with him, there."

"What are you going to do?" asked Cynthia.

"Remove the problem. This is under Home rule, not American. So, he's going to Home. There, he'll receive his judgment, and I don't expect that he'll ever bother anyone ever again," Muriel said. "Marcia, I need a visual on where the compound was. He, or at least his body, is going back there. It's time that state started cleaning up its own mess."

"I'll go with you," Marcia said.

"It's apt to be pretty rough, Marcia. Are you sure you want to do that?"

"Yes. I agree that stuff like this needs to be finished. I'll even leave a note with the police. I've seen the records," Marcia said. "They knew this stuff was going on, and did nothing about it. Even the courts turned a blind eye to it. Here they come."

Marcia and Muriel went out the doors to meet Marcia's troops and their prisoner. "You! Bitch! Where's my wife!" the man shouted.

"You know, I really don't react well to being called names," Muriel said. "I think it's time for you to take a little trip." And Marcia and Muriel translated the man to Home. They were gone a half hour, while the Envoys that had helped Cynthia introduced themselves and talked with her. Muriel returned without Marcia, who had apparently gone back to her office.

Chapter 14

Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow
(Thursday afternoon, later, Friday morning)

Muriel got Cynthia and Ruth over to the Guest House, and installed in a room. The manager assigned his gentlest Envoys to the room to help them calm down. After that, she got with the Envoys that had tried to protect them.

“What happened? How'd you get involved?” she asked.

“It was after she'd been grabbed. Her father was frantic, to the point of having a heart attack. When he landed at Home, he was still desperate to try to find her and help her. But for the longest time, there was no way we could get her away,” one of them said. “It wasn't until she'd managed to escape that we could do anything. We found people that would be willing to help her, some, at least with food and clothing. Sometimes with a place to stay for a couple of days. But the man kept coming, and we were so taken up with distracting him that there wasn't much we could do.”

“Why didn't you bring her here?”

“We weren't sure where 'here' was,” the other one said. “And he was keeping us pretty busy. It was actually that trucker that knew where you were, and it took very little to nudge him to bring her here. In the mean time, we were in a fight with the man, trying to keep him from knowing where she was going.”

“She never saw you?”

“That was the instructions we had, ma'am. Don't let her know we were Envoys. Sergeant Carter was the one that said it.”

“Well, you did good,” Muriel said. “You got her here, safely. Now we can take over getting her and her daughter trained.”

“If you don't mind – I mean – well, we'd like to help. We'll do whatever you say, learn whatever we need to learn, but”

“I think I understand. Well, that's for tomorrow. In the mean time, why don't you get to know my squads, and maybe talk to Anna and Hanna about the difficulties of training and educating a child,” Muriel said. “Adults are MUCH easier, for the most part. But I think Cynthia is almost as much of a child as Ruth is. Oh, and you might start considering whether or not to change gender, and maybe age. What do you think she would respond best to, things like that. OK?”

“Yea! Sure! Thanks. But . . . what will the boss say?” Muriel just smiled, and handed him her passport. “Oops. No wonder you are able to take charge so well and quickly.

Nobody told us what to expect.”

“Yea, and you weren't brought in through the doors, so you didn't see the sign on the window. Never mind. Just think about it, and we'll see what happens, tomorrow morning,” Muriel replied, then left to talk to Ted and the Thompsons.

Jack wasn't in Ted's office, and Muriel looked quizzically at him about it. “He's with Jeff,” Ted said, in response to her raised and questioning eyebrows. “Getting him loaded down with engineering degrees, and showing him what can be done with shields. I think he found a friend.”

“And what about his parents?”

“No sweat. They're in remarkably good shape considering the ordeal they went through. Probably, thanks to Fran. We were just talking about jobs, and things that they could do,” Ted said. “Oh, and I found out how the parties knew about them. They were volunteers for one of the parties, and had talked about their son becoming an electronics engineer. They grabbed all three at the same time.”

“Jack say anything else?”

“Yea,” Ted said. “They told him exactly what they wanted, and why they wanted it. I passed the record to Melanie. He also outlined how he re-rigged it to be a suicide device. We got him out just in time. He was about to pull the trigger. He'd also put back doors in the computers, that if he didn't log in in three days, the computers would automatically delete everything. He didn't know that they'd sent out at least one set of plans. Melanie's tracking that down, now.”

“OK, anything else I should know about?” asked Muriel.

“Nope. I think we've got it covered for the night,” Ted replied.

“Then I think I'm going to go to my apartment and relax, have supper, and see what tomorrow brings. The most exhausting part of today was working with Cynthia. She was really traumatized. It'll take her a while to come down off of it, but the cause is no more. One trip Home, one trip to where that religious nut compound was, and a trip to the local police to say there was a body out there that the needed to investigate,” Muriel said.

“GEEZ! You really did it?”

“There wasn't any way to help him. So gray he was almost black. And a very bad attitude toward women. I didn't want his body to have any marks on it to indicate a cause of death. It'll look like heart failure,” Muriel replied. “It also serves to put that state on notice that we are NOT amused with having to clean up their mess. The police and courts, both, ignored what was going on out there, despite numerous complaints.”

“Are YOU all right?”

"Yep. No problem. So is Marcia. She wanted to see an end to this, so she went with me," Muriel replied. "I'll see you in the morning." And she translated out.

The next morning, Cynthia and Ruth were both in her office, along with Hanna and Brenda, and Anna. "I thought you were going back to Russia," Muriel said.

"I was. But this is more important. Mom knows where I am, and can contact me if anything comes up. We've been talking with Ruth's mother about training for Ruth. It took a bit but she understands why the girl needs it, and how she can be protected by an Envoy. I think she still has some questions, though," Anna said. "Actually, it was Hanna that convinced her that Ruth needed training and additional protection."

"Yea, well she's been through it, so she should know. See anything of a couple of strange Envoys?" asked Muriel.

"I know they're around, but they haven't shown themselves," Anna replied.

"OK, then I guess it's question and answer time. Hi, Cynthia. How are you doing, today?" asked Muriel, sweetly, while shifting gears.

"He's really gone?"

"He's really gone," Muriel replied. "Even his soul. He'll never bother you again. Now, I understand that you have questions. I have answers. Or, at least, a way to get answers. So, ask."

"Well, I don't know anything about you or this place. I mean, I've heard of Envoys, and that there was an Enclave, someplace. But what ARE you?" asked Cynthia.

"Good question." Hanna and Brenda escorted Ruth out to the break room, for potty break, and snack. Kids are always hungry. "The simple answer is that I'm human. But there are a lot of Envoys, around here. They're pure soul, and absolute protectors and nurturers. We humans with the training are simply carrying on what should have been, way back when. But because it was delayed, we're also having to clean up the mess that the world is in, socially. That's our problem. So, Envoys are soul. Humans are soul in a body . . ." And the connection began. Fran was right beside her as soon as it started, but she was smiling, so Muriel wasn't concerned. It took about two minutes, then suddenly stopped.

"So, now you know what Envoys are. They are a part of Humans. Well, some of them, anyway. There's still a lot of Envoys that have never experienced a body. You have a lot more experiences available to you, now, as well as a lot more capability. And you're still in charge. The current human personality is ALWAYS in charge," Muriel said. "That's because it's the one with the most current experiences."

"Wow. Is Ruth going to have to go through that?"

“Not really. This is the fast way of connecting someone to their soul. The way I learned gives a person the power and the abilities, but not the deep connection to really make a difference. That's what we did with Hanna, when she was six. Then gave her the subconscious ability to shield, and began teaching her how to make shields into things. Eventually, she was taught how to make the subconscious protective shield consciously, and the subconscious training went away. She's just starting to learn about translating around earth – that's where we go from one point to another without any travel time. The last part of the training – going to Home and coming back – we won't teach her until she's at least twelve, or is mature enough to handle it, but young enough that it won't affect her badly.”

Cynthia looked back toward her daughter, and exclaimed, “My Gosh! It's full of Envoys! The whole office is Envoys except you and Hanna and Anna!”

“Yep. My squads and Security Chief. And Brenda, that looks like she's twelve years old, but is much older. When Hanna reaches that age, then Brenda will pretend to 'age' along with her. Brenda is Hanna's protector, teacher, trainer, and best friend,” Muriel said. “We'd like to set the same thing up with Ruth. It'll make it easier on her to transition up to full adult status.”

“Yes. Of course,” replied Cynthia.

“We'd like to do the same with you, too,” Muriel added. “An Envoy would be able to answer your questions, and help you learn new things as you went along.”

“You think that's necessary?”

“I know how it helped me. And I absolutely know how it helped Anna and Hanna. Not necessary, no. But definitely recommended,” Muriel said.

“Well . . . if you think so.”

“Besides, what you didn't know is that you were able to stay ahead of that man because you had two Envoys running interference, and nudging you in directions toward Enclave. They're here, and would like to continue being protectors and teachers,” Muriel said. “Guys, I think it's time you showed yourselves. I know you're in here.” And the two Envoys turned on their shields to show they were there.

“Sit. Relax. You're not being called on the carpet. Besides,” she quipped, “no carpet. Cynthia, these are the Envoys that distracted and interfered with that man, so you could get away. They were under orders to not let you know about them until you got here. Now, as you know if you look at your soul, Envoys have no gender. They appear as they need to appear to do a job. Hanna's Envoy was a man and showed her as well as told her when they first met. Come to think of it, so was Mata. Most Envoys were. What I propose we do is get you fully trained, then train your daughter as far as we think she's able to handle, which means up through shields. But I think you ought to determine how you want these two to look before we start, then they can help with the training, and better get to know you. OK?”

“Um . . . yea, sure,” she replied.

“OK, now guys, do either of you have a problem with switching your apparent gender?” asked Muriel.

“Nope. We'll do whatever we need to do,” one of them replied. “And we have worked as women, just not very often.”

“Great. That makes it easier. And I take it that you two are used to working as a pair. What I'm going to suggest is that one of you be an older woman – oh, not much older, just older than Cynthia – and the other be a twelve year old girl. Not younger, since it would make your job much more difficult, if not impossible,” Muriel said. “Still sound OK?”

The two Envoys looked at each other for a moment, then changed. One to a stately, dignified and handsome middle aged woman and the other to a twelve year old girl that looked like she intended to get into trouble. And Muriel laughed. “Oh, those are excellent. The older friend and her daughter.”

“We've done this before,” the elder said. “Though I'll admit that it was in a far different place and time. At that time, we were spies, and she was the distraction.”

“I can see that,” Muriel said, laughing. “Why don't you go introduce yourself to your new charge, and let's see if it takes.”

“Why don't we start here?” asked the stately one. “I'm Joanne, usually just called Jo. And the erstwhile troublemaker next to me, that's just itching to meet your daughter, is Robin. And now you understand why I introduce us that way. No comic book jokes,” she said with a smile.

Muriel chuckled, having read several comics and being familiar with the characters she was implying. But, before Robin could squirt out of the room, Betty arrived. “I take it that you are going to do the same with Ruth that you did with Hanna?” she asked.

“Yea. That was the thought. Why?” Muriel asked.

“And you want to keep her occupied while you train her mother?” Betty asked.

“Again, yea. And you STILL haven't said why.” Muriel said.

“It won't work. Hanna was better behaved and had more focus. Try that with Ruth, and you'll be interrupted about fifty times an hour. I'm not putting her down,” Betty said. “Simply stating the truth. She's at that flighty age. Even more than you were.” Muriel stuck out her tongue at her. “But, if you train her first, we should be able to keep her busy with making things with shields, and maybe Anna's action figures. Oh, I was in contact with Robin, too, and she feels that it's reasonable, and knows what to do to help.” she added, smugly.

“Uh, huh, and how did you come to this amazing conclusion?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, I talked to Hanna . . . oh,” Betty said, “yea. She’s got her own agenda.”

“Yep. She wants to see Anna dance or she wants the action figures, but she doesn't want to let on that it's for her. So, obviously, pick a patsy,” Muriel said, grinning. “Never try to pull a 'kid stunt' on a kid. They can see right through it. It never ceases to amaze me that adults lose that ability.”

And Robin started chuckling. “I can see where this can be exciting,” she said. “Is there any way to get educated on 'kid stunts'?”

“Not that I know of,” Muriel replied, “since they're kinda a subconscious thing that kids do. I'm not sure that anybody could even begin to figure all of them out. They aren't true bullying, though sometimes they're close. Somehow, 'I want' was built into humans. Or, come to think of it, maybe not just humans. I've seen a particular kitten that's the same way. Most adults grow out of that stage.”

“OK,” Betty said, “how are we going to do this, then?”

Chapter 15

It's a Kid Thing (Friday morning)

“Well,” Muriel said, “despite Hanna's interest in Anna's action figures, she may actually have a good idea. For Ruth, getting the initial training will be like playing a game. And kids are GOOD at playing games, especially if they think they can get the best of an adult. It's a kid thing.” Cynthia's mouth had dropped open at Muriel's so taking apart 'kid thinking'. “So, have Hanna bring her in here, and we'll see to it. Robin, do you have the download that Brenda and Betty came up with to give her the subconscious shield?”

“Yea, and the training instructions for getting her to work with shields,” Robin replied.

“Good. Then let's get to it,” Muriel said.

“Can I ask how you did that?” Cynthia asked.

“Of course you can ask. I'll even answer,” Muriel said, grinning. “I'm still something of a kid. And my friends have all tried something like this at one time or another. Kids can be the worst at rationalizing things. Come to think of it, maybe that 'kid thinking' is the actual basis of adults becoming lawyers! Naw. Couldn't be. Most kids aren't THAT vicious.”

Ruth came in with a large following of small people. After introductions between Ruth and Robin, the training began. Ruth was able to make a mental link to Robin easily. Getting her to connect to her power took a little longer, but not much. Most of that time was spent in giggling. But, once the power took hold, the rest was easy. Robin delivered the dump of how to create shields – and in particular how to subconsciously create the shield for protection. And, as a reward, Muriel gave her a package of Anna's action figures. Then, the thundering, yelling, kid herd escaped back to the break room and kitchen.

“Kinda leaves you breathless, doesn't it,” Muriel said, smiling at Cynthia.

“How do you deal with it?” asked Cynthia.

“That's what I've got Envoys for,” Muriel grinned. “I can only take just so much, even though I'm still pretty much just a kid. But they seem to thrive on it. And she WILL grow out of it, some. The trick is to get her to grow out of some of the rambunctiousness without it affecting her zest for life. OK, so let's go over some of the things you need to know, that weren't devised when you were born. The things that have changed from what your Envoy soul knows.”

And with that, Muriel and Jo showed her the difference in shields, and Cynthia was set up in about fifteen minutes. After that, it was a trip to the clothiers that were so helpful and had the room to train new trainees. Muriel left them there, to check on Ruth and see what else was happening in the world. Ruth was whooping with excitement and Anna came to

Muriel's office just long enough to make the comment that she was glad that SHE wasn't performing for kids that age, or she'd be worn out in a week. She was exhausted just watching the girl. Then, just as Muriel was about to go back to the clothiers, Jo showed up with Cynthia, who showed off a variety of clothes ranging from business wear to grunge for doing gardening or other dirty jobs. And Ruth was still squealing with delight in the back of the break room. So Muriel and Jo took Cynthia on a translation tour of Enclave, and then Home. Just as they arrived, Anna came back into Muriel's office.

"Muriel, I noticed something that I think could help Cynthia a great deal. Remember how you had Nika and I deep link?" Anna asked.

"Of course I remember. It wasn't that long ago," Muriel said. "You're thinking that she should have the same sort of link?"

"Yep. Oh, Ruth already is that deeply linked to Robin," Anna said. "Hanna suggested it to her. I can't say it's calmed her down any," she added, when a particularly loud squeal shattered the air. "Oh, and it's not just my set that she has, now. Taylor gave her a set of the 'Jolly Greens'. Did you know that they do formation riding and close order drill?"

"Nope. I'll have to see that. Is this something he just came up with?" Muriel asked.

"Oh, no. It's always been there. He just didn't make a big thing of it. But he showed her how to activate the demonstration that they put on, trooping the colors. Quite complex, and drives the troops parading behind them crazy," Anna added with a grin. "The Queen has had to switch the order of the troops three times, now."

"Would it really help me that much to have this . . . whatever you called it?" asked Cynthia.

"Well, it would help you to know that someone else besides you is looking out for you," Muriel said. "And Envoys do more than just protect. I've got twenty-one of them that are constantly looking out for me and trying to come up with something I need or want before I even know it, myself. And a few of them cook for me, and clean up my apartment and office, and such."

"Use them to do chores? But" Cynthia tapered off, at a loss for words.

"Ask Joanne," Muriel said. "Ask any of mine what they feel about it. Or Anna's. Taylor's got a different situation, since his regiment and security squads are human. But even so, he's got a squad of Envoys for training and such, and I'd just bet they do more than just that."

"Or you could ask me," Chuck said, coming into Muriel's office. "Are you about through gadding about, now? I thought Cynthia might like something to eat or drink. After all, you've got to have left her rather breathless with your wild performance, young lady."

"Why, Chuck, how kind of you to think of her, like that," Muriel said, sweetly. That false

sweetly that usually heralds teeth.

“Just showing Cynthia how we work together. Well, work in my case. Loaf in yours,” Chuck replied.

“What? I'm supposed to work? I thought that's what YOU were for. Besides, I was just conserving my strength for the next emergency.” Muriel said, as a black body landed in her lap and meeped. “How about it, Cynthia? Something to drink while everything tries to settle in your mind?” asked Muriel. Jo, sitting next to her, touched her arm for a second, and a mental conversation went on between them.

“You can do that?” asked Cynthia, looking at Jo. Jo just nodded. “Then please”

Jo and Cynthia just looked at each other for a minute, while Muriel petted Panther, and Chuck brought coffee, tea, and some of the famous grape and berry drink that the Envoys seemed to love. After a second, Cynthia looked around and said, “Oh,” then started smiling and looked back at Jo. Another couple of minutes went by, and Cynthia was smiling and MUCH more relaxed.

“Oh, Muriel! I'm sorry,” she said, when the mental communication broke off. “I didn't understand. Now, I do. Jo offered to take some of the pressure off me, but the method was for her to contact my soul and bleed some information across that would give me the background and framework that all the rest would connect to. Well, it worked, and in the process, I learned what you meant by a deeper link with Jo. So we completed the process. I really didn't mean to exclude you like that.”

“You didn't. I knew something was going on, and suspected what it was when you started relaxing down,” Muriel said, smiling. “I'm glad you took it to the next step. Something to help revitalize you while your power catches up with your body?” she asked, indicating the drinks that Chuck had brought.

“Oh! Thanks. Yes, that would be nice,” Cynthia said. “Would this work with Robin and Ruth?”

“Yes, definitely. In fact, they may already have achieved it,” Muriel said. “The squeals have died down, and glancing back at the break room it looks like your daughter and Robin are looking at each other a lot, which would indicate mental activity. I also see that Anna's figurines are doing things that I didn't know they could do. And your daughter is wearing different clothes.”

“But, we didn't have any . . . oh. Robin has been teaching her to make her own?”

“Looks that way,” Muriel grinned. “You may notice a change in Ruth. Oh, nothing serious, just that she has a little more concentration, and stability. And less squeals. She'll still be very much a kid, but there may be some episodes of surprising maturity. Now, I realize that you've been in a bad situation for the past six years or so. Obviously, whatever you were doing before you were abducted isn't happening any more. What I propose we do is find out

what you are good at, get you trained up, and see about getting you some work. No, I'm not pushing you out," she added. "It's entirely possible that we can find work right here in Enclave for you. This isn't something immediate. But something we can work towards."

"I wanted to get into design. Fashion or interior, or something. Shortly before I was kidnapped my advisor told me that I should look around for something else, since the market was flooded with would-be designers," Cynthia said. Just as she said that, Carla walked into the office.

"Muriel, I just got the most astounding message from one of my squad. Something about their getting a message from an Envoy that you had someone interested in design," she said.

"Cynthia, now you've just seen how I manage to get things done as quickly as I do," Muriel said, laughing. "My bet is that Jo sent out a request through the Envoys, and found someone in Carla's squad, and told them the situation. And they passed it on to Carla. Carla, by the way, is a designer, an Ambassador, and one of my friends from years ago. Carla, this is Cynthia. She was tangled up in that 'religious' compound mess that Marcia cleaned out."

"Hi, Cynthia," said Carla. "Look, I'm going to get right to the point. What kind of design were you looking to get into?"

"I don't know, really. My student advisor had said that the market was flooded with designers, and I should choose a different career field," Cynthia said.

"OK, well, that's not important right now. Why don't you tell me a bit about yourself," Carla said.

"There's not much to say," Cynthia said. "I've always liked art – drawing, sometimes sculpture, like in clay. Things like that."

"Ever doodle?" asked Carla.

"Well, sure. Everybody does at times," Cynthia said.

"What's the most common thing you doodle?" asked Carla.

"Well, cars, I guess. Sometimes fashions, but they take more thought," Cynthia said. "If I'm doodling, then it's just something idle while I'm doing something else."

"OK, what about more serious drawings, Not things you're doing for an assignment, but just things that occur to you, so you try to work them out?" asked Carla.

"Fashions, mostly. Sometimes buildings – you know, inside rooms and offices," Cynthia said. "Trying to figure out what's inside the head of the person I pretend has commissioned it, what it's purpose is, what kind of building its in, stuff like that."

“OK, I'm going to suggest that you come over to my office and look around, talk to my squad, stuff like that,” Carla said. “Have you ever worked with a computer?”

“Oh, a little. I could never afford one of my own.” Cynthia said. “And the type that's needed for design is very expensive, and needs lots of add-ons that I could never afford. I got a chance to use one of the ones in the college lab, briefly. It was a little awkward for me to use, but seemed like it could be fun.”

“Uh, huh. Why don't we go to my office. I'll set you up with various design courses and a computer, so you can play around a bit,” Carla said. “That way, we can see what you're most comfortable with. You don't mind, do you, Muriel?”

“Of course not. Does Betty have all the courses available?” Muriel asked.

“Well, actually, I have them. She's thinking of putting me on the faculty of the University of Home,” Carla said with a laugh. “That way, if anyone wants something in the design or architectural fields she can send them to me to sort out what the person wants to do, and can do. She doesn't feel qualified in that area. Kinda like what she did with Jeff.”

“Wait a minute! Jeff is on the faculty?” asked Muriel.

“Of course. Been that way for a couple of years. That's because he knows engineering and computer programming sides of it,” Carla said. “The difference is that he can't be bothered with the actual courses, so Betty still supplies the dumps according to what Jeff feels are necessary. Oh, and both of us have degrees in education, now, so we can qualify as full professors. Isn't that nice?” Muriel just laughed.

“OK, Professor Carla, go forth and profess. Show her what you do with design, and how you do it,” Muriel said, and Carla translated Cynthia and herself out of Muriel's office.

That just left Muriel and her little, black kitten. Muriel knew it couldn't last. But, for the moment, it was peaceful to have nothing to do but sit and be the warm bed for Panther. And things were peaceful around the office, too, now. No more squeals from the back of the break room. No one headed towards her office – except the one man that nagged at Muriel's attention. Something about him. Something nasty. She hastily put up a shield across the entrance, and asked Ted to come to her office.

As he translated in, he asked, “What's up?”

“That man,” she said, indicating direction with her chin. “He seems familiar, but I can't place him.

Ted went over to Mata's desk, as if to ask her a question, and as he turned back, said, “Oh, my. Peter Schwartz. Remember now? The copyright and patent scammer that claimed that he had the patents and copyrights to all the 'effects' we produced during our introduction to the 'rich and famous' party?”

"You've got to be kidding! He was told that he isn't allowed in here, again. I thought he'd left the state," Muriel exclaimed. "Oh, wait! Bob's guys have got him. We'll find out shortly what he wants."

Shortly, Bob showed up at her office, and said, "Um . . . Muriel. I've got a problem. A man that's on the 'keep out' list showed up and is demanding to see you."

"Of course he is. His name is Peter Schwartz, and he's a scammer. So, what's he want this time?" asked Muriel.

"Well, I'm not sure. Something about withdrawing from a campaign," Bob replied.

"But I'm not running for Oh, I'm dumb. He's looking to find out where my parents are. Or at least one of them. Which party did he say he represented?" asked Muriel.

"Well, he just said 'the party'. Like there's only one," Bob said.

"Actually, in this state, there is. Maybe in all the others, too. At least that's the way it looks," Muriel replied. "OK, ask Tex to send one of his specials to pick him up, if you would, please. I believe the court told him to leave the state and not come back. Then bring him over, and maybe we can get more sense out of him."

"OK. Oh, and Tex said he'd be right here. He wants to watch your interrogation." Muriel just laughed.

Chapter 16

Confessions of a Not So Very Nice Person

(Friday morning, later)

When Tex showed up and had a cup of coffee in his hand, Bob brought over the 'alleged' scammer. "Hello, Schwartz. You were told not to come back. For any reason," Muriel said. "In fact, it was a judge that told you that."

"Yea, well I didn't have a choice, did I? The party said to come find out why your parents dropped out of the race," Schwartz said.

"Uh, huh. WHICH party?"

"Oh, come on! There's only one party. They just make it look like there's two. YOU know that," Schwartz said.

"Why would I know that?" asked Muriel. "Aside from the fact that I'm too young to vote, there are two major parties listed in the state. All the rest are 'also-rans', and Independents aren't even allowed on the ballot."

"Look, they know you were investigating them, and the interlocking structure," said Swartz. "You told your parents something, and they pulled out. Their campaign headquarters are vacant, and that home they were supposed to be living in is actually empty, and has been the whole time."

"Really! Huh. I wonder where my parents were all that time," Muriel said. "Well, I suppose I'll have to wait until they show up to ask them."

"You're going to keep playing this game of yours, aren't you?" accused Schwartz.

"What game is that?" asked Muriel. "They're adults. I'm not their parent. I really have no idea of where they might be. Why, I didn't even know that they were considering running for anything political until I noticed the signs go up on the road, outside."

"You're kidding. No, you're lying. You know where they live. That's all you have to do is tell me, and I'll be gone and not come back," Schwartz said.

"Well, as for being gone and not coming back, I believe Tex may have something to say about that. You were ordered not to return to Enclave. In fact, the judge suggested that you not enter the state again," Muriel said. "And as for me giving out private information on American citizens, or even Citizens of Home . . . well . . . that's just not going to happen. So, since you don't want to tell me what this is all about, I'll just turn you over to him and wash my hands of you."

"You don't want to do that," Schwartz said. "They'll be after you. If you'd just answered

my questions and let me go then there'd have been no problem. But have me locked up, and they'll come after you, and they won't be nice about it."

"Oh? How so?" asked Muriel.

"They have their ways," Schwartz said. "They'll get rid of all you interfering people." Then, suddenly realizing that he may have said too much, he clamped his lips together.

"That sounds a bit ominous, Schwartz. But, as I'm sure you realize, Envoys and those with Envoy training are awfully hard to bully. And even harder to get rid of," Muriel said. "So, you've got me curious as to how you think we can be gotten rid of. I'm sure it would be easier on you if you were cooperative. You wouldn't want to be implicated in anything that might happen to us. After all, anything that happens to us would result in federal charges, since we have a treaty with this country. And, I can't see anyone revoking that in the near future."

"Oh, come on! Nobody's invulnerable!" he exclaimed.

"AH! So it WAS a threat," Muriel said.

"I want my lawyer," Schwartz said.

"Wouldn't do you any good. This is the property of Home and, under the treaty, is only subject to the laws of Home. And, in here, we don't need lawyers. We only need them when there's some legal activity outside of Enclave that we have to deal with," Muriel said. "So, you might as well tell all. Otherwise, I'll just turn you over to Tex and let you swing in the breeze."

"You can't do that! It's against the law!" said Schwartz.

"Of course we can do that. Just on the fact that you entered Enclave in defiance of a court order. But now, with threatening a friendly foreign nation that has a treaty with the United States, you just expanded it to federal charges," Muriel said. "Now, I'm sure that this can all be straightened out, but it would take cooperation on your part to do it. WE'RE willing to cooperate," she added, baiting the hook.

"Look, if I tell you what I know, will you let me go?" asked Schwartz.

"Once I know what you know, then I'll decide what I'll do with you," Muriel said, beginning to apply the screws. "I won't play games with you, Schwartz. You've been a thorn in our side before. And you were ordered by a court NOT to return, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES. Yet, here you are. Now, it's possible that you have information that could help us in our inquiries, as the British say. I do know this. If you don't talk, you'll be going with Tex for having disobeyed a court order, and for threatening me and all the residents of Enclave. I don't like being threatened. I don't like having my friends and neighbors threatened. And I especially don't like it when the one doing the threatening is some faceless organization that wants to stay hidden. Names, Schwartz. Names. Positions in the organization. What organization is it. What are they intending. I want information."

“GEEZ! They'd kill me!” he said.

“They'd probably do that, anyway. You know too much,” Muriel said. “But, with information, we can TRY to save your life.”

And it came. Names. Organizational positions, and what organization it was. How it was linked to the state level. And, when Muriel prodded him a bit more about how 'they' intended to get rid of Envoys and those with Envoy training, he said, “They've got some sort of weapon, or something. I don't know much about it, only that they were intending to test it, today. Somewhere out here – out in the desert. It's some sort of beam, or something.”

“Who's doing the testing?” Muriel asked. Schwartz pointed to a name on the list she held, and one of her squads immediately left the break room. They were back, moments later, with the information that the test had already taken place, and there were bodies all over the ground. The squad had put up a shield around the area, but had no idea how to shut down the device. It was still running.

“Tex,” Muriel said, “it looks like I'm going to need your help, after all. But I only want trained people in there. Mata, one squad with me. Oh, and I'll need Jack, if we can pull him away. I need to know what I'm looking for to switch it off.” Panther meeped a complaint at her and jumped off her lap.

“Muriel? You needed Jack?” asked Jeff, translating in.

“Yep. Somebody built his device and tested it this morning. Obvious results,” Muriel said in disgust, “everybody died. Fortunately, it's out in the desert, away from general population. But it's still running. My squad put up a shield around it, to keep people out, but I'm going to have to shut it down.”

“Geez! You shouldn't have to. It should have cut through the power and turned itself off. Unless they did something stupid like modify it,” Jack said. “Muriel, you're going to have to trust me. You'd never figure out what they did, especially from a distance. I'm going to have to go with you and figure out how to turn it off.”

Muriel looked at him for a second, then said, “You know what you're risking. We'll do our best to protect you, and you have some ability, now, yourself. But you haven't learned all the tricks, yet.”

“He won't need to,” Marcia said, coming into the room. “Lock down Enclave to protect the innocents. My troops and I will be going with you. And believe me, if WE tag you, you WILL be found and retrieved. This is OUR fight, too.”

“OK, if you say so,” Muriel said. “Tex, NOBODY goes in until we're sure the device is shut down. But when it is, it will be up to you and your guys to identify the bodies and translate them out to where ever they need to go. Will that be a problem?”

“Naw, not for us. We just gotta do some paperwork on our end,” Tex said.

"Then, whenever people are ready, we can go," Muriel said. She looked around and found one squad – with Mata – out front, along with Marcia's troops. They were shortly joined by five of Tex's trainees. Marcia, Tex, Jack and Muriel went out front and translated to the site of the disaster.

It ended up being worse than they thought, but they didn't know how bad until they were able to shut down the device and get inside the shields. The site was in the desert, all right, but it was a case of the owner buying the land and being in a county island – an unincorporated area of desert where there weren't any services provided by a city or such. And they'd held the test within one hundred yards of the FRONT of the house. That meant that the owner's family, in the house, all died – his wife and three kids. Not only that, but it appeared that some hikers had been crossing the area of desert behind his house, and were also caught in it. Altogether, counting those who had come to see the demonstration, about fifty people had died. And two dogs.

Jack, true to his word, took one look at the bread-boarded rig and realized what they had done, found the switch, and shut it off. To Muriel, it just looked like a jumble of parts and wires. Then there was a major discussion between Tex and Jack as to who would actually get the machine. Tex insisted that it was evidence in the murder/suicide investigation. Jack insisted that it was too dangerous to have out in the public – even if it was locked up in the evidence locker at headquarters, and that other people could die if it were ever turned on.

Muriel won. "Tex, we've held evidence before, both for you and for Secret Service and FBI. It'll go in a locked and shielded cell, where NOBODY can get at it without proper authorization. One stipulation, though. It must be accompanied by an Envoy or one trained in Envoy techniques, and come back to us when it's use as evidence is finished for final destruction. Same with any plans they have of this device." Then, the discussion moved off of Jack and onto Muriel. But she was adamant. The device must NEVER come to light in such a way that the public could know about it.

The discussion ended, much the way that Muriel expected, with the plans – found in the house – and the machine being boxed up and sealed with tape, and marked with the chain of evidence tag including it's storage location. And Tex, himself, went with the box to ensure that it was properly stored. Muriel had no problem with that. This wasn't a point of trust. It was a point of evidence, and the extra precautions were necessary. Actually, she didn't think that any court would actually ask for it in evidence, since a coroner would simply find heart failure as the cause of death.

Jeff, Jack, and Marcia's team all translated back to Enclave as soon as their part was finished. Muriel and Tex had translated to the warehouse prison, with her squad and Mata, to entomb the device in a cell, and record the cell number and ensure that constant surveillance was on the cell. Not a problem for Enclave that simply tasked one of Jeff's style of computers to make a constant record of anyone even approaching the cell.

Poor Tex's troops had the nasty job of photographing and bagging up all the deceased and translating them to various locations for autopsy, since no single facility would be able to

handle the quantity of bodies at one time. Fortunately for them, they didn't have to physically handle the bodies. Shields DO have their useful purposes.

And Jack, having seen the physical device and knowing what he designed was able to determine what had gone wrong – why the power had still been on, since the machine was supposed to interrupt the power when it was engaged. It was simply a case of their putting the generator running it under metal shielding, grounded, that blocked the type of wave-form that the device produced.

Back in Muriel's office, Tex produced a list of names – the identification of the deceased idiots that had been at the demonstration. The list included the names of the property owner's wife and kids, which made Muriel a bit sad, but Mata took it and ran it against the list of party members. The top tier of the parties had been decimated, which they had all expected. The only outstanding part of that list was the name of the engineer that put the rig together and tripped the switch. Jack knew him. In fact, the guy was a class-mate of his. One that Jack couldn't see as being inventive at all, as the guy perpetually poached answers off of class-mates and solutions to labs off of lab mates. The only independent thing the guy had done was to shield the generator and converter from the wave-form. All the rest was just as Jack had designed it. Only that one fail-safe had been eliminated, allowing the device to keep functioning and potentially killing people.

And in the back of the break room, oblivious to all else that was going on, Ruth was learning how to create her own images from which to make things, instead of using those provided by someone else. And she was having a blast with it, accompanied by much laughter and a few squeals. Muriel felt drawn to the squeals and laughter of someone young discovering her world, and went back to watch.

Anna stopped her before she got too close – not to keep her away, but to pass her some information. “Muriel, you've got a potential Ambassador to the young. Hanna started playing a game with Ruth, pushing her to visualize real objects and duplicate them. She's like a crossover between child and adult. If Ruth makes something incorrectly, they laugh over it, and Hanna coaxes her to see what's wrong and correct it, instead of starting over. And, it's working.”

“Yes,” said a voice on Muriel's right. When she turned, it was Robin, “And we Envoys are eating it up. Hanna's teaching us how to learn, and how to teach the young. And she doesn't even know she's doing it. During a break, I asked Hanna about perspective. She'd never heard of it. Yet, she's teaching Ruth what it is and how it works. They've made boxes and balls, and various other shapes. And Hanna insists on having Ruth use color to show her the various sides or whatever, so she can see what to correct.”

Anna picked up the conversation with, “She's learning colors and numbers – you know, counting. And she's learning letters, as Hanna gets her to create them in the air, in front of her. I don't know where this girl's ability came from, but it's astounding!”

“So . . . a natural born teacher. Is she working with Betty at all?” asked Muriel.

“Not officially,” Anna said. “But Betty is watching her like a hawk, you can believe that! And she wants to talk to Hanna when the two finally take a break. Even Don is interested, and trying to understand what she's doing and how she's doing it.”

“Hmm. She may not know how she's doing it,” Muriel said. “Some things just seem to be instinctive to various people. It's entirely possible that it's part of the soul's personality, and we never picked up on it.”

“Betty's considered that. That's why she wants to talk to Hanna, to see how closely she's linked to her soul,” Anna said.

“Then, I'll have to keep in touch with Betty, and see what's happening,” Muriel said.

Chapter 17

Backlash

(Friday afternoon)

It was early afternoon when Muriel finally had a chance to talk to Jeff and Jack about Jack's abilities and training. She'd gone to Jeff's office shortly after lunch to find them going over plans for some of the most common programs, to decide how to enact them on the new computers and phones that Jeff had designed. It took only a few minutes of listening to Jeff and Jack for Muriel to come to a tentative decision. It was obvious that Jack was taking to the use of semi-intelligent shields for programming with relish. Not that he was putting relish on the shields, of course.

Muriel left them and walked down the hall to Carla's office, and found a similar situation with Cynthia. This scared, abused woman was now taking an active interest in something other than her daughter – without taking away from her love and interest in her daughter, by the way. She was finding a way to express herself, using shields and imaging to create such diverse things and clothing and cars. And that confirmed Muriel's tentative decision. Now, all she had to do was sell it to the two prospective victims . . . ur . . . uh . . . friends.

"Jeff, Carla," Muriel said and sent. "I'd like you to meet me in my office, along with Cynthia and Jack, please. I've got some questions for the two of you."

In moments, the four were ensconced in chairs, and sipping their favorite beverages. And then Muriel lowered the boom. "Look, gang, you've each managed to go further than I expected with your professions. No, that's not a put down. I'm quite happy with what you've managed to do, and it's thoroughly to your credit that you've achieved what you have. But . . . your offices were originally designed to build up twelve year old kids that were just discovering what they wanted to do. We've got buildings on the other side of the street that are just going to waste. I think you two, in particular, could take over one of those buildings and set up offices opposite each other," she said.

"You're throwing us out?" asked Jeff, in fun.

"Nope. I want to keep you two around. You're good for me," Muriel said, "and good for Enclave. And you're Ambassadors. But you both need room to expand your operations. Each of you, now, has someone to work with. Jeff, you've got both Jack and Dave that could have sub-offices as part of your office. Carla, you've got Cynthia, and – I hate to tell you – but you may end up with her daughter, too. She's already showing leanings that way, from what Anna and Robin are telling me. Nope. I'm just offering you more room to expand."

"So, they'd be working for us?" asked Carla.

"In a sense. They'd actually be hired by Home, through Enclave, just as you were," Muriel said. "That makes it easier on both you and Enclave. But they'd be working under you or for you in the sense that they'd be assigned to your offices."

“OK . . . um . . . how do I put this . . . ,” started Jeff.

“They'd be Ambassadors, too. But how active they'd be in that capacity, and when and where would be up to each of you,” Muriel replied to the unspoken question. “And, of course, they'd have all the perks and benefits of being Ambassadors. Do the same that I did with you guys. I gave you the titles, and you grew into them.”

“Woof!” Carla said. “Yea, I begin to see your point. I'm not sure how to set it up, though.”

“Well, each of you would have to come to some decisions,” Muriel said. “But I see that as personal choice based on work patterns and such. You would, of course, design your own offices and work spaces. And Jeff, I might ask you to help with reshaping the current office space to help ease the pressure in some other areas.”

“You mean Don, and all of Marcia's crew. Yea, I might do that. But I think I'd ask for Carla's input, too, since the original office spaces were designed by an engineer and not an architect. And they were done without the understanding of what shields could actually do,” Jeff said.

“I'd go along with that. My engineering isn't as good as yours, but my designs certainly are better,” Carla said, tweaking him a bit.

“That's all right, Carla. I yield to your expert opinion of your being a designing woman,” Jeff quipped back.

“You know, Muriel,” Carla suddenly said, “I can see what you're trying to do, and I think I approve. You're trying to group similar fields with overlapping areas together, and we're the first two that you could absolutely see as being able to share space like that. Jeff, I think if you're not doing anything for an hour or so, we should get together and see what we need and how to set it up.”

“Yep. Oh, Muriel, would Jack and Dave need full squads of Envoys?” asked Jeff.

“I'd think one Envoy each, to begin with. If they show a need of having more, then you might have to expand some space for them,” Muriel said. “Oh, and part of this is to give you the space to have a work bay for cars. And for Carla to have space to create her architectural miniatures.”

“What do you think, Carla?” asked Jeff.

“Fremont Street?” Carla replied.

“Oh, gad! You WOULD think of that. Glass wall offices so the civilians can watch the monkeys?” asked Jeff. “And glaring designs of cars and fashions flashing off and on, on the ceiling?”

"Yes, as long as I can partition off a space for clothing fittings," Carla replied. Probably near the back of the building, where it wouldn't be so obvious."

"You know, it's going to take a day to do this, once we have the designs in place. Half for ours, and half for our former offices," Jeff said.

"Yea, but I'm not pressed right now. You?" asked Carla.

"Nope. Things are running smoothly. No emergencies. THIS is going to be GOOD," Jeff said.

"You bet. SPACE!" Carla giggled back. And with that, the two ran, laughing, out of the office and to the building next to Triple E.

"Well, that seemed to go well," Muriel commented to herself and anyone that wanted to hear.

"Hmm, yes. Possibly the best pairing other than Fran and Don that you could have chosen to pair in a new office building," Mata replied. Muriel slowly turned and looked at Mata. "Oh, come on! You mean to tell me that you didn't know?"

"Oh . . . wow. Nope. Not a clue," Muriel said, and sighed. "Well, you two, you have some catching up to do, too. To start with, take out your passports and take a look at them." And they did, then sat back and stared at the certificate inside declaring them to be Ambassadors of Home.

"Now, what this means to you is simple," Muriel added. "You're employed by Home, and get a salary. You also get all the rest that guests get – food, shelter if you want it or need it, you can always make your own clothes, medical attention when needed, education and entertainment. All free. Also, pretty much anything you want in Enclave, free. It does mean work, but I don't think you'll find it too hard. You've already met your direct supervisors, and obviously you get along with them since they were the ones that chose you to join them. We're not like employers in the outside world. We understand mistakes. We understand the need for time off. We DEFINITELY understand emergencies. It isn't so much that you work for us as that you work WITH us – part of a team. And we believe in giving credit where credit is due."

"The reason for the Ambassadorship is because there may be times when you're dealing with the general public outside the walls of Enclave," Muriel continued. "It puts some teeth into suggestions you make to companies, especially those we own. And it gives you some rank when dealing with some of the higher power people we deal with, sometimes. And that's nothing to worry about, and you'll have the opportunity to see how we do it."

"But, doesn't it take special training?" asked Jack. Cynthia just looked shell shocked.

"If there's any special training you need, we'll see to it that you get it," Muriel said.

"You're thinking of it as an impossibly high rank that requires certain types of personality. It isn't. It's just a job. And anything you need to learn you can learn on the job. We won't throw you into situations that you can't handle. Ask Jeff. All my friends had the rank of Ambassador from the time we came out here. But in Jeff's case, he wasn't actively working at it until just recently. He wasn't ready. Then, one day, a situation went down in one of his companies, and he came and asked questions, then went back and tried to handle it himself. When he couldn't handle it, he brought the people causing the problem to me, and I fired them. That was his first realization that rank can be used as a blunt instrument, when it's needed. So, I turned around and made him the president of the companies, directly representing Home. And suddenly he realized what I'd done. I'd waited until he was ready for the responsibility, feeding him bits of it along the way to become ready, then put him in charge when I knew he could do it, and knew how to holler for help when he needed it."

"And that's the biggest part of it," Muriel concluded. "We back our people. We back them by being ready to answer questions, or provide help, or anything else that's needed. Cynthia, you met Taylor. Ask him about how we treated him. Or ask Anna about how she first used her Ambassadorship." Then she stopped and looked blank for a second. "Or, just sit tight and watch. I think you're going to get a demonstration of it in the next few minutes."

As she said that last, two people translated in to her office. "Hi, Melanie. Hi, Mister President. Sit. Coffee?" asked Muriel. And out of the corner of her eye, she saw two jaws try to land in the owner's laps. "So, what can I do for you?"

"Did you have to kill them?" asked the President.

"Well, if I knew who you were talking about, I could probably give you a better answer. But right off the top of my head, I – or we, because I think you're referring to all of Enclave – didn't kill anyone," Muriel replied.

"Those people out in the desert," he said.

"Nope. Didn't kill them. Found out about it too late to stop them from killing themselves, so we called in Tex to be official, and went in and shut down the weapon they'd created that was the actual cause of their death," Muriel said.

"That's not what I'm hearing from some of the people up on the hill," he replied.

"I'd ask if they were there, but obviously they weren't, though they probably knew about the weapon being developed. And maybe about the test. How they found out that it HAD been tested would be an interesting study," Muriel said. "Look, some very bad people decided we were in the way. So they kidnapped a kid out of college, along with his parents, and threatened to do nasty things to his parents if he didn't build something for them. Apparently the kid was smart enough to put two and two together and come up with something other than five, which most politicians would answer. So, he rigged it so it would be a suicide weapon, and not kill the target that they intended – Envoys and those with Envoy training. Melanie knows about part of that, since she was the one that brought us the file to be decoded."

"Marcia and her crew rescued the kid, and his parents, and brought them in. By the way, they are all now Citizens of Home," Muriel added. "We got wind of the possibility of a test of the weapon out here, and tried to trace where it was. Well, my squad found it, but the damage had already been done. The top tier of both major political parties in this county, as well as some businessmen from the area, had managed to get someone else to actually build the device, and he'd eliminated a fail-safe that would have shut the machine down. So, we had to go in and, from the outside of a heavy weight shield, figure out how to turn it off. Since we had the inventor, he went along with us and gave me the information on where the off switch was. I turned it off, then Tex's trained people went in and gathered up the bodies, and Tex and I translated the device to secure storage."

"Yea, fifty people and two dogs died that maybe didn't need to. But that's not our fault. We did everything we could to keep people FROM dying. The worst part of it was that the kids and dogs died. They had no idea what was going on. And now, there's nothing left of them. The people you want are the ones that wanted the weapon in order to eliminate a whole people, and were too stupid to realize the danger to themselves," Muriel said.

"Well, you say that you have the inventor of this weapon. You'll have to turn him over to us for murder." the President said.

"Nope. Not going to happen," Muriel said. "First, he created it under duress. It was not something that he wanted to do. Second, the use of any device, tool, or weapon isn't the responsibility of the inventor. Or even the company that makes such. It's the responsibility of those that actually use the device, tool, or weapon. If a screwdriver is used to murder someone, it isn't the inventor or manufacturer of the screwdriver that's arrested, but the person that used it to kill. Same thing here. Do you blame Colt for inventing the revolver? Or John Moses Browning for the guns he invented and his company made and makes? Of course not. In fact, there's a federal law that absolves such companies of fault for the common stupidity of common people using the weapons improperly or irresponsibly."

"Second, he is here under protective custody from the very people that wanted the device in order to kill Envoys and those trained in Envoy techniques. Those are the people you need to find and prosecute," Muriel said. "In addition, he and his parents are Citizens of Home. And there's no extradition between the United States and Home. Come on, Mister President, you know how to think better than that. And you damn sure know not to knuckle under to rumor and disinformation from the very idiots that wanted this done."

"Well, I can't very well arrest two complete political parties!" he said with some heat.

"You can when they are in the processes of creating, or trying to create, terrorist activities," Muriel replied, softly. "This is the same as a bomber blowing himself up by accident. You know what he intended the bomb for, you know who he was doing it for. So you go roll up the operation that fostered the hate that created the terrorist attempt."

"And, you have another option. You can force the dissolution of the two parties for various reasons, including collusion and fostering terrorism. Which means, at this point in

time, that all their current candidates for office would end up swept off the ballots. And they don't have time to create new parties and get nominees on the ballots. Certainly, the idiots that are left can't be any worse than the idiots on the ballots, now," Muriel said with some humor. "Look how much the two parties have managed to louse up the country with weighted legislation in favor of businesses, and all the massive expenses for projects that only helped a few, at the expense of the many."

"You're doing it again, aren't you," he asked as if it were a statement.

"Yep. And now you know why I can't support ANY government to the exclusion of others. If I, from outside, try to tell them that they're wrong, they just laugh and say, 'go away little girl. You wouldn't understand'. Trouble is, I DO understand, and that's what bothers them enough to say it's none of my business. But when their business threatens the people that follow me, I HAVE to do something," Muriel said. "In this case, I tried to get in there and stop this before anyone got hurt. But they were too good. They killed themselves, anyway. Go back and tell whoever gave you the information that they are under investigation for terrorism and attempted genocide of a people. That ought to flush out the snakes."

"How can you do this? You're an American citizen!" he asked. "How can you stand up for another people against your own?"

"Are you sorry that you're a Citizen of Home, yourself? Are you sorry that you've got the training that has saved your life more than once?" asked Muriel. "I'm not doing this for one people against another. I'm doing this for ALL people, regardless of nationality. Or race. Or religion. Or any of the other absurdities that people have used to create an 'us versus them' attitude. It's a small world, Mister President. And it isn't going to get any bigger by people trying to kill other people over a different life-style."

"I'm not going to hand over an innocent man, Mister President," Muriel said. "Nor am I going to hand over a weapon that could be potentially corrected to be used against us. Either act would be irresponsible on my part. And any attempts to grab either out of Home or any of it's properties will result in the sort of retaliation that you know I'm capable of. Once I found out the extent of the problem, I had the choice of trying to stop the dangerous parts, or just rolling up both of the parties, whole, and translating them to Home. I chose the lesser of two evils in order to save the inevitable innocents that would get swept up with the rest. And I saved the life of the man that was being ill-used by those political parties. It's up to you to cauterize the wound in American civilization."

"You're a hard woman, Muriel White."

"Was I any easier when I was twelve? A bully is a bully, no matter what his rank, or job, or political affiliation," Muriel said. "I don't like this situation any better than you do. The difference is that I'm honestly trying to contain it as much as possible, and save as many innocent people as I can. If you can come up with a better way to do this, I'd be happy to hear it."

The President sighed. "No," he finally said. "I don't have a better solution. And you're

right. I can't very well charge the inventor of this thing when it wasn't him that used it to kill people. In fact, if what you say is true, then he really didn't have any choice, did he? But I have no idea what I'm going to tell people back in Washington."

"I'm sure you'll come up with something. Perhaps that it's time to take a realistic view of American society and stop listening to the 'special interest groups' that only want things THEIR way. Their way may not be in the interest of America as a whole," Muriel said.

"You're not going to take direct action in this?" he asked.

"Not unless I have to. And then, only if it comes to the point of directly affecting us," Muriel said. "You know that. You didn't even have to ask. I can't just arbitrarily impose my point of view on other people. That would simply be reducing myself to their level. But I will take out bullies that try to impose their will on me or those that look to me for protection. And have. Frequently. I will not be made the heavy in the political games that are going on."

"Well," the President said, "then I guess all I can do is go back and see if I can straighten this mess out." And he and Melanie left.

Chapter 18

I See What You Did, There (Friday afternoon, later)

“GEEZ!” exclaimed Jack, when the President had left. “He didn’t even know that I was sitting two seats away from him!”

“It wasn’t in his best interest to know. Melanie may have told him, but I doubt it,” Muriel said. “It was in his best interest to stay focused on me and what I had to say.”

“Is that what being an Ambassador is like?” Jack asked.

“Sometimes. At a much higher level than you should ever have to operate,” Muriel said with a sigh. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have subjected you to that. But there wasn’t time to get you out of here, even to getting you into the break room. And he was quite a bit more vituperative at first than I would have expected. He KNOWS better than to rely on rumor around me.”

“But you defended me,” Jack said.

“Of course. You’re a victim. There’s no reason for you to be criminalized,” Muriel said. “Look,” she added, “this was intense, yes. BUT . . . it doesn’t change a thing. You’re here, you’re a Citizen of Home, and you’re an Ambassador. We WILL defend you. We will support you. We will make sure you have the education to achieve your vision. You are one of us.”

“I think I understand,” Cynthia said. “You started with the facts, and then just wouldn’t back down. Does it work that way when you deal with employees, too? I mean, do you back them?”

“Now, that’s the best question I’ve heard in a long time. Yes, if they’re clearly in the right. And if I don’t know, I investigate before I’ll even talk to anybody. I learned that from Tex and Henry and Melanie. Oh, sorry. Tex is State Police. Henry and his boss Adam are FBI. And Melanie’s Secret Service and National Security Advisor. They’re all cops from various points of view, and I learned a lot from them. Basically, especially in my case, I HAVE to have facts and evidence to back up the facts before I act. So, if an employee messes up and comes to me, or well, actually, his supervisor, and admits that he messed up, then we try to find a way to fix it. Troublemakers, though, get tossed as quickly as we can detect them. We had a few in here, shortly after I came to Enclave. I bounced them. In some cases had them arrested.”

“Geez, you’re tough,” Jack said.

“I have to be. As the Leader of Home I hold absolute authority to decide the fate of an individual. The only judgment higher than mine is the one you just went through, and I don’t use mine in the same manner. I just want the troublemakers out, so the rest of us can get on

with what we're doing. We don't have courts, here. We have a police force that basically directs people to the restaurants and restrooms. And yes, there is a difference. If you haven't tried the restaurants in Enclave, then you have a treat in store for you. And, because you're Citizens of Home, they'll feed you free, and bend over backward to be sure you're satisfied with their work. Oh, and we have exactly one law. Our police are authorized to arrest anyone that breaks the peace. Mostly, they just warn people and try to jolly them down. In four years I think Bob's only arrested someone about five times. And the last one was put in protective custody in a cell instead of in Guest House, because he was a flighty flight risk."

"You're an absolute ruler?" asked Jack.

"Nope. An absolute arbiter, maybe. But I'm not a ruler. I'm a leader," Muriel replied. "The concept doesn't have an equal on earth. Basically, I'm simply the one that all the Envoys are following. And, if someone better came along, they'd follow her . . . or him, as the case may be. It's happened before, and I didn't even know the switch had been made until a LONG time after it happened."

"But . . . to have us sit in on a conversation between you and the President of the United States . . . I mean . . .," Cynthia began.

"Oh, something you should understand. America is a country. Just a country. Home would count as a whole world. As an Ambassador, you would be equivalent in rank to him," Muriel said, and watched their jaws drop, again. "According to Will Rogers, Diplomacy is the art of saying 'Nice doggie' until you can find a rock. I just try to keep my rocks closer to hand and make sure that my opponent knows how good my aim is. And, as far as I'm concerned, I'm as good or better than whoever it is that I'm talking to. So, the form of diplomacy I practice is to not bother practicing it. I'm me. I'm called the Leader of Home. And Home is subject to NO other country. So, that eliminates a whole lot of formality all at once, because formality is just a way of hiding the fact that one has no respect for one's opponent."

"So, what you do is come to a decision and take a stand on that position, and let them wear themselves out trying to budge you?" asked Cynthia.

"Close, but I don't waste all that time. I state my position, then tell them to get out. Why bother discussing it with them? As long as they think they have a way to convince me that I'm wrong, they'll keep talking and saying nothing intelligent. Like China," Muriel mused. "Never mind, long story. And it was when the People's Republic of China still existed. In any case, I refuse to be bullied, and formalities are just another form of bullying. Nope, treat me with respect and there's no problem. Start in with formalities that you expect me to follow and I'll show you that I already HAVE that rock, and you're just a dog." And Jack started laughing. It took a moment, but Cynthia joined him. "So, don't let people's rank impress or intimidate you. They're just people that want something from you. You out-rank most of them and are of equal rank to the rest. That's what plenipotentiary means, basically."

"Mommy," Ruth said, running into Muriel's office, "Look what I can do!" And she proceeded to change clothes at the rate of about one change every five seconds. Three of the changes were uniforms.

“Are we going to have to wear uniforms, too?” asked Cynthia.

“To tell you the truth, I don't know,” Muriel said. “When I first came out here, the uniform was a way of showing my parents that I had new abilities. They were just crappy things that Ted had come up with to be comfortable. And yes, he felt the same way about them. So, about a month later we designed new ones. In fact, Carla was instrumental in designing them. When my friends came out, it was pretty much the same thing. It showed that they belonged in Enclave. Then later, it was because they were actually representing Enclave and Home. Besides, it was a way of tweaking the man.”

“I think we're going to have to ask Jeff and Carla what they want you to wear. If they ever surface. I know Jeff uses uniforms when he's at the car factories, and Carla uses uniforms when she's out on a job. But I don't know if you two would be used like that,” Muriel added.

“You don't But, I mean, don't you tell them what to do?” asked Cynthia.

“Not hardly,” Muriel said. “Oh, I may suggestions from time to time. Like when I switched Jeff up to full diplomatic status by making him the president of six companies all at once. And I'm usually in a uniform, simply because that's what people look for. But you two are in a different situation. You may not be dealing with the public in the same way. It might be good for you to know them, though, like if we have a formal occasion. After all, you ARE Ambassadors. But, they're easy to wear and comfortable. Even the formal ones are. The advantages of using shields to create them.”

“Ruth,” Muriel said, changing gears, “that's very good, and you do that very well. Did Hanna teach you?”

“Uh, huh. And Robin. They got somebody in that knew about kids clothes, and they gave me the images, and helped me fix them so they felt good,” Ruth said. “We had FUN!”

“I guess you did!” Muriel said, grinning.

“Betty gave her the schooling that was age appropriate for her,” Hanna said, coming into the office. “Oh, and Anna went home. You were busy, so she asked me to say goodbye to you for her. Anyway, Ruth now knows colors and numbers up to one hundred, and letters. And some Envoy came in and gave her a tablet, like a computer, that she can draw and practice letters and numbers on.”

“Must have been one of Jeff's squad,” Muriel said. “No sweat, and a good idea. It gives her something to do when she runs out of energy,” she added, grinning.

Jeff came in, and looked at the tablet, then smiled. “This one is not hooked up to the Internet,” he said, “so you don't have to worry about bad influences corrupting your daughter. When she's older, we can upgrade it. Oh, and unlike the production models that we're intending to put out, it won't act as a phone. Well, Muriel,” he said, turning to her, “it's done.

We rearranged the old office, so Don has an extra cubical to build his histories in. We also shuffled some of the offices around to consolidate Marcia's troops into the same general area, and gave her a 'war room'. And yes, everybody's happy with the changes. We made sure of that and got their input before we made any changes."

Carla came in behind Jeff, and went over to Cynthia. "I've got an office for you, next to mine so we can share ideas and I can help you get up to speed with some of the ways we do things. Oh, and Ruth has a desk in your office, her sized, as well as a desk for Robin, so she can field anyone coming into your office away from her. Of course, if there's any changes that you'd like to make, that can be done, and we can even use it as a learning device for you. So don't feel that you have to keep things just as they are."

And Jeff said, "I hope you don't mind, but we recruited a couple of Envoys to act as reception for the building. I don't expect a lot of traffic, but it would serve to keep the desk manned while one was escorting someone to the proper office. Dave is already over there, and in seventh heaven. We put his office on the end, next to the car bay. That way he can see what is happening with the cars he's tested or going to test, and try to figure out how to overcome possible problems. And the break room is a combined affair, and serves to mask the car bay on my side, and the fitting rooms on Carla's side."

"Oh, my! I'm going to have to see this," Muriel said, getting up. "You two might as well come along. You're going to see it anyway, and this way Jeff and Carla don't feel that you're avoiding them," she added, grinning. Jeff hit her.

It was a short walk across the street, but the differences were immediately apparent as they exited Muriel's office. The front of the building was much more stylish, and the entrance and front of the offices were set back from the front of the surrounding building by what looked like ornate sandstone columns. The center aisle was a bit wider than the old office, but then the entire building was wider than the old office. It was also garish.

Muriel laughed. "Fremont Street, indeed. But when were you ever in Las Vegas?"

Carla just grinned at her and said, "That's what a classical education is for, dontchaknow." And Muriel hit her.

"THIS definitely has nothing to do with a classical education," Muriel said, laughing. "Seriously, how'd you get the panels to display like that?"

"One of Jeff's computers," Carla said. "And it's not even working hard. The panels are all shields told to segment to look like a certain number of panels at any one time. And the quantity of panels changes from one to ten randomly, depending on what's being displayed. It even has neat transitions between the changes. The computer even works out the three dimensional effect without using glasses. As they walked through the doors, the receptionist looked up at the miniature crowd.

"Shirley, where's Will?" asked Carla.

The bubbly, grinning receptionist replied, "Oh, him. He's on break. He claims that he's exhausted from all the work he did supervising your office. In other words, standing around and watching everyone else work." Then the woman Envoy turned to Muriel and said, "Don't believe anything Carla tells you. It's all done with mirrors."

Muriel quietly deadpanned back, "Shirley you jest." And both Jeff and Carla hit her. Shirley just laughed. That infectious type that tends to get everyone going.

"Muriel, people told me about you, and I didn't believe them. I do, now, though," Shirley said. "Welcome to the Design Studio. We're all just designing people."

"I can see where it's going to be fun to come over here whenever you're on the desk, Shirley. But won't it be uncomfortable for you?" asked Muriel with a grin.

"Well, if I'm on my feet, I can stand it," Shirley replied.

"So, what do you do, here, Shirley?" asked Muriel. "Paperwork, answer phones?"

"Nope. That's all handled in the offices. I just get to tell people where to go," she replied.

"Uh, huh. I've DEFINITELY got to come over here more often. If for no other reason than to improve my comedy routines," Muriel said. "Shirley, that's the most fun I've had throwing one-liners in a long time. But I'd really like to see these offices." And see them she did.

On the left, Jeff's office started with his formal and casual areas, and his security chief's desk was in line with the offset doorway with the squad set up behind him. Next was Jack's office, which looked a bit bare, since there were only two desks in it. However, the space behind the Envoy's desk seemed to be filled with the transparent image of some complex networking structure.

"Oh, WOW!" Jack said. "You did it! How'd you figure out all the connections?"

"It's not complete. That's simply as far as I was able to take it before other things started interfering – like Muriel," Jeff said. She refrained from hitting him. She just smiled, sweetly. "The thing that concerns me is, if we complete it, will we end up with a giant sized semi-intelligent shield? Or another person?"

"I don't think either will happen. What we've got, here, is just a representation," Jack said. "At least, if what you've been telling me is correct. I'm still new to the idea."

"Oh, Muriel, the reason for the extra space in Jack's office is that eventually he may need a squad," Jeff said. "But right now, he's still learning what it is that he needs to learn. And it's a learning experience for both of us. He asks good questions. This is an entirely new field of shield manipulation, and I'm having to pass as much back to Betty as I do forward to Jack. She's got a team in Home going over what I teach him as well as what I pass back up

the line, and the results of THAT are fascinating. They may end up revamping the whole way they present training in general.”

“Isn’t that done the way Steve did the space-scape for Melanie?” asked Muriel.

“Good catch. In general, yes. Different because of different subject matter,” Jeff said. But the same sort of construction. When it’s completed, we’ll even be able to collapse it down for storage.”

“Hmm. That makes me wonder if there are connections between suns, and between suns and planets that we’re not realizing,” Muriel said.

“You’re wondering if there’s intelligence in the universe, aren’t you?” Jeff said.

“Well, if there’s connections, then it would certainly lend some credence to the idea of it at least being a shield. And that the ‘rules’ of the universe are something that’s built into it,” Muriel said. And they all felt a sudden hush followed by a flurry of activity. “Oh, dear. I seem to have done it again. Sorry people,” she sang out.

“Uh, huh,” Jeff said. “The answer is forty-two. And it comes from a book by Douglas Adams.”

“Huh?” Muriel asked, intelligently.

“You want to know the meaning of life, the universe, and everything. The answer is forty-two,” Jeff said with a straight face. “Look it up. ‘Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy’. It even became a meme on the Internet. If nothing else, you’ll find that there’s someone whose humor is even worse than yours.”

“Oh, that,” Muriel said. “Actually, I wasn’t even thinking of that. But now that you mention it”

“Uh, huh. Muriel, you lie through your teeth. You NEVER say anything without knowing all about what you’re saying,” Jeff said. “You always were a complicated person, but you’ve become more so over the past four years. Let’s move on. Otherwise, you’ll end up giving me a headache.”

Beyond was Dave’s office, set up much like Jack’s, but the space behind his Envoy’s desk was given over to scale model car floating in the air, and Dave seemed to be examining something about the suspension. And beyond that was the car bay for working on prototypes. Muriel noticed that the design on the walls the length of the building seemed to flow into each other, even changing colors at times, with one fading into another. For such a vibrant design, it was actually rather restful. And then it was on to the break room.

Chapter 19

On the Green Meadows
(Friday afternoon, even later)

The break room was surrounded on three sides by paneled walls with neutral designs carved into the panels. On the wall on the left was a large screen television, high enough for everyone in the seats to be able to see. Behind that wall were the bathrooms for men and women. On the right, the wall held the various vending machines for pop and pre-prepared snacks. As in Muriel's office and the old office for her friends – and presumably in Ted's office – the vending machines had no coin or bill slot. Enclave owned the machines and bought the products in bulk. The kitchen area stretched across the back wall of the break room. And, in one chair, an Envoy lay sacked out.

"Will," Carla said, "What are you doing?"

"Just taking a break from all the hard work," he replied. "After all, this place was built by will, and I'm Will." Carla tried valiantly to look stern, but it didn't last. "Will, your jokes are as bad as Shirley's."

"Ah, but we make you laugh. And sometimes that's as good as a break. We know about you people. So focused on what you're doing that you can't even take an honest break away and let your mind find its own solutions," he said. "In all seriousness, Carla, we CAN behave ourselves with the civilians. And after all, you need a little joy in your life."

"Yes," said Carla, "And when I find this girl named Joy, I'll let you know."

"Hmm. Not bad," Muriel said. "You could probably improve the delivery a bit, but overall I'd say it was an eight out of ten." The scowl that Carla gave Muriel was spoiled by the appearance of a young – oh, say twelve year old – small female Envoy.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Joy." And that did it. The whole group cracked up.

"Now THAT'S a delivery," Muriel managed to sputter out while laughing. And Will just grinned.

"What IS all this!" asked Cynthia.

"Ah, well," Muriel replied, "I said it once about my office, and it's still true, here. This is a kids' office, and the kids are in charge. And what do kids do?"

And Carla and Jeff responded right on cue, "KIDS KID!"

They moved out of the break room and toward Carla's side of the building. And, suddenly, Muriel stopped short and started crying. She was immediately surrounded by her friends and Mata.

"What's wrong?" Mata demanded, but Muriel just shook her head and pointed at the wall. After a minute, she just grabbed Carla in a desperate hug.

"I didn't think ANYBODY knew those stories," she managed to get out. "But it's all there."

"What is?" Mata still demanded.

"A book. One I read when I was much younger," Muriel finally recovered, some. "'On the Green Meadows'. Thornton Burgess. Children's stories about animals. My parents have a copy, which is the only way I could have read it – it's that old. And Carla put it on the walls. The green meadows, the green forest, the smiling pond, the laughing brook, the animals . . ."

"Where do you think I saw it," Carla said. "And read it. And, when I was putting this together I thought 'why not?' and used those images to create areas that were geared towards females and males. And all child friendly. It was worth it just to see your face. Didn't remember it, did you. Not until you saw the wall. Deep memories. Old memories. The reason why the human personality is always dominant. We are not just the sum of all we've experienced, but more than that. You might even call it the synthesis of all we've experienced. But I think that's even selling it short. Anyway, I didn't think it would hit you that hard. Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about," Muriel replied, finally getting it all together again. "There were a few books like that that I read when I was young. And foolish. Then I started reading science fiction and was hooked. So, anyway, how'd you get the three dimensional effect?"

"Same as on the ceiling of the hall," Carla said. "We fed the old illustrations to the computer – same computer that controls the ceiling – and told it to 'make it real'. Longest pause I've ever seen from one of Jeff's machines. It must have searched all over the Internet for views that were similar enough to the illustrations to use. It even searched my mind, I think. Then the wall went fuzzy, then sharpened up and stabilized, and held. I looked it all over, then gave it confirmation, and the scene was locked. Now, the computer doesn't even work on it. It's just there. I think what it did was to pass the final, approved, graphic to the shield, and let it hold the image. Actually, Jeff's side is done the same way. Maybe the ceiling, too. I do know that the ceiling uses a randomization on the images and transitions, because every once in a while it throws two particular transitions together, and it's always the same two, and always in the same order."

"Yea," Jeff said. "It's almost scary how the machines work. Oh, I know it's the semi-intelligent part of the computer. But still, sometimes what it manages to do surpasses what we ask it to do."

With Muriel now calmed down, they went on to actually looking at Carla's office. There, next to the break room, were the fitting/changing rooms, which were NOT visible, behind walls and doors. But the area that they could see was where clients could see how the clothing fit and felt, by actually walking around normally and sitting and such. The lighting was cleverly

set up to be able to emulate various times of day or night, to show how the clothing would look under various lighting. The area could even handle disco and rock.

Moving toward the front of the building, there was one large office that contained five desks. One much smaller than the others. Two desks were obviously for Jo and Robin. And Ruth was bouncing up and down in delight. Though it looked like one large office, Muriel noted that it was two separate offices, so that Ruth and Cynthia wouldn't disturb each other, or Carla. A questioning look at Carla elicited the response that Ruth's office could be totally separated from the rest with partitions, and the lights dimmed, so that she could nap right there if she got tired.

Then there was Carla's own portion of the office. Over large, to accommodate an area where she could create architectural miniatures or models. Unlike her original office that had cloth swatches and pictures all over the walls, this simply continued the scene in the rest of her side of the building, and the furniture was quiet elegance. Jeff's office had given the impression of almost frantic activity. This, though, gave the impression of peace.

Then, Carla turned to Muriel and asked, "Would you mind if we put our apartments upstairs?"

"No. In fact, I don't even see it as a question to ask me. Carla," Muriel went on, "as far as I'm concerned, you're adults. Maybe YOUNG adults, but still adults, with your own minds and interests and abilities. What you do is up to you. Both of you. You have both done wonders in your professions, and astounded me every time. But, how did you keep it from me? And how long has this been going on?"

And Carla laughed. "Only about six months," she said. "But, I think it's solid. And yes, we'll be careful. But expect that you'll have two weddings to officiate. And, I'm glad you approved, because the apartments are already built, and Guest House has been given notice that we're leaving. In fact, we turned in our keys. We'll keep the shades drawn. I promise." And that got Muriel laughing.

"Well, this is an astounding achievement. Both your offices are very nicely done. And having you across from each other means that you can work on more projects that use both your talents. Oh, that statement by Shirley when we came in . . . are you intending to put up a sign that says 'Design Studio'?"

"Hmm. I hadn't thought of that, but maybe you're right. We've already got contracts from outside," Carla said. "Some we just flat turn down. They want our designs, but want them in traditional building or manufacturing, and it just can't be done. This . . . all this, though, is actually a showcase of what we can do. And I'm SO glad that you asked us to move out of our old offices. Jeff and I have been wondering how to approach you on the subject. We'd even been planning how we could do it, and this was one of the buildings we used as the basis for our models."

"So THAT'S how you put it together so quickly!"

"Yep," Carla replied. "It was all planned out, so all we need to do was get the people – Envoys – to put it together for us. Much like what happened with Anna's office, when you got the approval to set that up, but with more lead time and planning. That's why it took less time building it. We just removed the existing building and threw the image into its place, then solidified it. Checking the programming actually took the longest amount of time. Oh, and we didn't know about Jack, then, but even that worked out."

"Talking about me, again?" asked Jeff.

"Of course. Just can't get my mind off of you," Carla quipped back, to Jeff's startlement. "Relax. It's on. And she knows. Men," Carla said. "So timid. So shy. If it weren't for the aggression of women, the species would have died out long ago."

"Well, I think it's time for me to go see what you did to the old offices," Muriel said. And they walked diagonally across the street to the door. Muriel noticed that the plaques on either side of the doors had been changed. Then she went inside and was shocked. The only two offices that remained in the same place were Don's and Fran's. Don's had been expanded. And, of the rest, those not on Marcia's team were gathered to the front of the building. The decor hadn't changed, just the location. Marcia's office now included a 'war room', and the rest of her team surrounded her.

Nobody seemed out of sorts with the change, and were kidding about whether they'd be able to find their offices, now. But all of them congratulated Jeff and Carla on their move, and were supportive. The one distinctive thing was that Marcia's troops were all gathered around the bathrooms, which also engendered some kidding concerning the reason for the location.

About that time, the party broke up, and people scattered to various places for dinner. Muriel headed back toward her office to check, one last time, that things were still quiet when she heard a 'meep'. Looking down, to her left, she saw Panther looking back at her. Briefly. Then the kitten began pitoning up her leg. When she reached her upper thigh, Muriel picked her up and held her in her arms.

"How'd you get out, you little monster?" she asked. "I KNOW we shielded the doors so you couldn't get past," she added, as she walked into her office. Just out of curiosity, and not really expecting to get anything coherent from the pint-sized ball of fur, she sent a questioning mental probe toward the kitten as she set her on the desk and started petting her. She got an answer, in images, that shocked her enough to holler for Ted.

"What happened!" Ted said, as he arrived.

"She can translate," Muriel replied. "I was out checking out Jeff's and Carla's new offices, then looking at how they'd arranged the old office area. On the way back, Panther meeped at me, then started climbing up my leg. You know," Muriel added, "how I put a shield on the door so she couldn't get out again, after that fiasco with the snake. But somehow she got out. So, when I got back to my office, I sent a mental probe to her to see if I could find out how she did it. The images I got back showed her looking for me, then mentally seeking me

and translating to where I was.”

“Oh, my,” Ted said, sitting down across from her. He said it again, and with more force, when Soul was suddenly facing him on the desk and meeping for attention. “And it would appear that what one knows, the other knows,” he added.

“What do we do, now?” asked Muriel.

“You said you made mental contact with her?” Ted asked. At her nod, he went on, “did you read how she did it, or did she send it to you?”

“I . . . um . . . you know? I'm not quite sure,” she said. “Why?”

“You know how we keep saying that Envoys are power that's made enough connections to attain self-awareness and intelligence?” Ted asked. “What about the ones that haven't achieved enough connections for intelligence, yet? Or at least intelligence as we know it.”

“Oh, my . . . ,” Muriel replied.

“Yep. I think we're seeing a proto-soul. Like Jeff's semi-intelligent shields, only in a physical body,” Ted replied.

“Oh, now THAT complicates things. So, you're saying that Jeff's shields are like dogs, but without a body. Obedient, easy to train . . . oh, my,” she said.

“You're repeating yourself. But yes, it's that big. This may affect other animals, too,” Ted said.

“Dolphins,” Muriel returned.

“Yep. Maybe more,” Ted said.

“We've been changing the dynamics. We thought we were only changing them for humans, and on earth. But what you're saying is that we're changing the way power becomes intelligence, too,” Muriel said.

“Maybe not. Maybe we just never saw it before. It may have been here all this time, and it took these two kittens to bring it to our attention,” Ted replied. “I've got some in the Home think-tank looking into it.”

“Oh, dear. And here I was just coming back to see if there was anything new on the political party issue,” Muriel said.

“Well, that's easily answered,” Mata said from her desk. “No. And I don't expect anything before Monday. The President is still dithering, and the national parties are confused by the arrest of their people. The county parties are leaderless, now, and haven't figured out

what to do next. I'm going to make a suggestion that you aren't going to like. Take over the parties. Ramrod your people into place, here in the county, and make it stick. State, too, if you can."

"What about the national level, though," asked Muriel. "That's where we need to make the biggest changes. Oh, gad, no. We can't. Their platforms are a mess, and there's no way we can work with them. We'd be better off setting up our own party and platform."

"I know we have some trainees in politics," Ted said. "What level?"

"Mostly local," Mata replied. "City and such. "The counties locked them out last year. Wouldn't allow them to run."

"OK," Ted said, "I'm going to look into it and see if we can at least get watchdogs in the House and Senate. The more the better. The type of yappers that would not only raise a stink in Congress but in the media about undue influence. Wish me luck."

"Yea. Right. Good luck with that," Muriel said with a straight face. When Ted looked pained, she just stuck her tongue out at him.

Chapter 20

Report from the Front

(Monday morning)

. . . And in other news, twenty top members of the two major political parties have been arrested on charges of fostering, promoting and engaging in terrorist activities, and for illegal entry into a closed and restricted building. Sources indicate that they were found in the CIA building, which had been emptied and locked by the Secret Service. They were apparently engaged in building a device to kill Envoys and Envoy trained humans. If found to be true, then additional charges may be brought against these people, as their actions would have been against a friendly foreign nation – one that has supplied America with services and training far beyond that available before they came to this country. There is a possible connection in the Phoenix, Arizona area where fifty people died as the result of activating a device behind the house of a high ranking member of one of the political parties. Included in the death count were the wife and three children of the owner of the house, two hitchhikers, and two dogs.

“Well, THAT certainly caught my attention,” Muriel said. “Do we know who leaked the news?”

“The President. Through appropriate cutouts, of course,” Ted said, as he relaxed in his usual chair in Muriel's casual area. “He's hoping to flush out a few more, and setting up for declaring the two parties as a clear and present danger to the United States. At least, that's what Melanie said.”

“Melanie contacted you?” asked Muriel.

“Yea. You weren't up yet, so she contacted me to let me know that it would hit the news this morning,” Ted replied, in an off hand manner suitable for tweaking Muriel about getting up late.

“Uh, huh. And she 'just happened' to contact you because she didn't know if I was up or not. I smell a set-up – like someone contacting her to tell her I wasn't up, and to pass the juicy news to you,” Muriel said.

“Would I do that?” asked Ted.

“Of course. Or, better still, you'd get Bart or Mata to do that. Just so you'd have a chance to tweak me,” Muriel said. “Won't work, and I've got the proof. My computer logs will show that I was working at the time. Just from my room instead of down here. And not only that, but Chuck was there, and he'll back me up.”

“I was trying to find the date of your birth, so we could throw a party. I kept coming up with the strangest results, though,” Muriel said. “It said that you were born on three separate days of three separate months of three separate years, and had to be delivered in sections.

Some assembly required.” And that did it. Grape and berry liquid covered Mata's monitor, and the poor Envoy glared at the two like they were naughty children. Which simply served to set Ted and Muriel, both, laughing.

“Seriously,” Ted said, when he'd settled down, “what were you working on?”

“Oh, I had requests for statues for France and Germany. I got involved in working on the French one, and lost track of time,” Muriel said.

“So, others want figures, too,” Ted said.

“Yep. And I keep telling them that I don't have one,” Muriel said sweetly.

“Sure you do. It's just that it's the number one,” Ted replied, with a straight face.

“Why Ted! I didn't know you noticed,” Muriel said. As a loud gulp from Muriel's left indicated that the monitor had just barely been saved. “You see? I'm number one.”

“Muriel,” Mata said, “you're doing it again. You've GOT to give me more time to get another mouthful, or the full effect is lost.” And this time it was Ted that was trying to water the floor – with coffee. As he cleaned up after himself, he glared at BOTH Mata and Muriel.

“I think I begin to see why you insist on wearing boots,” he said.

“Yep. It's getting rather deep in here,” Muriel said, smiling. Ted just groaned.

“Who's that?” Muriel asked, coming up out of her chair and heading for the door.

“I don't know,” Ted replied, following her. “But it's got Marcia and her troops heading to stop them.”

“SHIT! More than that,” Muriel exclaimed. There's a double squad of Home Regiment, AND Taylor. And they've got their rifles pointed at them. What the hell's going on?” By this time, she'd reached the center of the restraining line, and the advancing party had stopped about ten feet away.

“Identify yourselves,” Muriel said.

“Bitch! If I want any lip out of you” With the first work Muriel took two steps forward and backhanded him with a closed fist, which put him on the ground.

“BOY! You WILL speak with respect, or I'll send you to Home, and get your identification from your cohorts, so I'll know where to send the body,” Muriel said. “This is Enclave – property of Home and under HOME rule. And here you WILL be respectful and not break the peace. Now, get your ass up here and tell me who you are and why you think you can come in here with that attitude.” ::Melanie, I think we have the next contestant in the 'being stupid' contest,:: she sent, including an image of the fallen man.

Suddenly, there were more people in the street than Muriel had ever seen at one time. Some in suits, but most in uniforms of the Secret Service. Even Henry and Adam were there.

"My turn, Muriel," Melanie said. "Cuff them. And get that sad sack up on his feet." A flurry of activity followed, quickly ended with all the original crowd handcuffed. Some of them the worse for wear from having tried to resist Envoy trained police that were in no mood to take anything from anyone. "for your information, I'm Melanie Carter, National Security Advisor and Secret Service officer," she said, holding up her identification.

"Now," Melanie said, "I don't need identification on you lot. I already know who all of you are, what positions you hold in the political parties, and what businesses you answer to. The only thing I DON'T know is what you thought you were going to accomplish, here. And I really don't need that to haul you in for treaty violations, and assorted other criminal charges. And I'm not going to ask you. SHE is," she added, pointing to Muriel. "And you will answer. Over to you, Muriel."

Muriel said nothing, at first. Simply increased her size until she was looming over the man that had first spoken. Then, she started to glow, and somebody to one side of her said, "Oh, shit. Red dot in black, glowing eyes." Then there was a sudden >CRACK< and large wings were extended to either side of her shoulders. They flexed a couple of times, then furled themselves against her back. By this time, the man was wishing he was anywhere but here – shocked beyond anything that had ever shocked him before as he looked up at this huge woman/girl that looked totally inhuman.

"Now," Muriel said, quietly, and without emotion, "you will tell me who you are, and what you're doing here." And she moved a slider to 'truth' in his mind. And he did. Sometimes gibbering in fear, but unable to stop himself. His name. The names of all the people in the crowd. What affiliations they had. And, most importantly, why they had come to Enclave. He talked, and the information he gave went way beyond just the crowd of people that stood behind him, aghast. He talked, while the breeze played through the feathers on Muriel's wings, causing the only other sound there was. And he talked, trembling in fear, as this impossible being looked impassively down on him like the angel of death, herself. He talked for a half hour, held up by two of Henry's men to keep him from collapsing. And then he stopped, and Muriel unlocked the 'truth' in his mind and slowly, in reverse order, the wings unfurled again, then disappeared. The glow of her body died. The red dot and black glow of her eyes died, and she resumed her normal appearance. Just a very disgusted sixteen year old girl.

She looked at the crowd that had followed the man. "This is Enclave, the Embassy of Home and under Home rule. And, as the representative of the People of Home, I have asked for and received the truth of you people," she said. "And I will tell you this. There is no way that I can forgive you for your behavior. And the reason I can't is because there is no way that you can atone for it. Not in this life, no matter how long you live. There is no way that you can make it up to the people that died because of your stupidity. Your bigotry. Your hate of something that was new and different. Your hate of a whole people. You cannot ask their forgiveness, the innocent ones that died. You are incapable of working for the betterment of

your fellow men and women. You seek only to enlarge yourselves, and make yourselves kings and queens and princes of this country, to the detriment of its citizens. And so, you will eventually die, and go and be judged. And you will realize, then the magnitude of the horror you have inflicted on the world. And then . . . even your soul will die.”

She turned to Melanie and said, “Take them. I think you have enough, now, to roll up the whole organization, even if you have to supply the hard evidence, yourself. Take these walking dead people out of my sight. There's nothing I can do for them,” she finished, sadly. Then she walked back into her office. Alone.

And in the air, behind her, was a DVD in a case, marked with “Ambassador Muriel”. One of the uniformed Secret Service officers created a box, and it was quickly filled with DVDs from each of the other trained personnel. Each marked with the individual's name and title. The squads from the Regiment of Home brought their rifles up, then reversed them to point to the ground, trigger guard facing forward. The about faced, and translated out – all but Taylor who went to Muriel's office. Marcia and her troops turned their backs on the crowd and also left, on foot, with Marcia going to Muriel's office. Ted just shook his head, sadly, and turned around and walked away to Muriel's office.

That left just Melanie, Henry and Adam, and their people surrounding the crowd. “I don't know whether you know it or not,” Henry said, “or whether it would even mean anything to you. But you just insulted and abused the one person in this country that would have fought for you – defended you against anyone – had you only been human. You've made yourselves monsters that even she can't save. And now she's beating herself up over it because there was nothing she could do. So, now you go to jail. Then to court to hear your earthly judgment. And, eventually you will die. And then you'll know what real judgment is. You'll judge yourselves – without excuse, without rationalization. Trust me, it's worse than anything you've ever experienced in your lives, or ever could experience. I know. I'm one of those you wanted to kill. And I've been to Home and been judged, and came back. She wasn't kidding. What you've done? There is no excuse for it. No rationalization that can cover the guilt and shame. After your bodies die, your souls will die. No continuation. No return. Nothing. That's what you have to look forward to for the rest of your life. No matter what you believe, then you will know and it will be too much for your soul.” He stopped, and sighed. “Let's get these people processed, people. Then we can all go home.” And the crowd was translated out.

And in Muriel's office, she was saying, “It's so sad. Why have they forsaken themselves.” And her words echoed those in a religious book. One that she had read, and no longer believed in.

“Their choice, Muriel,” Ted said. “They made themselves that way. Oh, they had help getting to this point. But they could have backed off. They could have taken a long, hard look at themselves and decided that that wasn't the way to behave. They chose not to. And, as hard as it is to face, there was – and is – nothing you could do about it, now.”

Taylor simply went over to her and held her. A hug that wasn't a hug, but more the way one would hold a baby, with one hand supporting the back of her head. But, where words

wouldn't serve, that simple embrace with nothing in it but love and respect for this young girl that had taken so much on herself. And finally, after long minutes, she lifted her head from his shoulder and smiled at him in thanks.

Then Muriel went to Marcia and held her. "This had to have been as rough on you as it was on me," she murmured. "But thank you for being there. And thank the rest of your troops, too."

"Geez, girl, do you really think I would have missed it? It's so seldom that we get a chance to see you really show off," Marcia said, and Muriel laughed and mock punched her. "Seriously, kid, you did the only thing you COULD do. And you did it dramatically and with style. There just wasn't anything there for you to work with. You did good." Ted and Marcia left, then. Taylor stayed.

"Muriel, can I talk to you?" he asked.

"Of course you can. Sit. Don't mind me, I just need to stop vibrating," she said. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Marriage." And Muriel froze. "My parents and grandmother want me to get married. Oh, not right away, but as soon as I'm of age. But they want me to start looking, now," he said.

"O-K. I'm awake, now. Tell me, Taylor, why do you think I can help you?" asked Muriel.

"Um . . . well . . . you're going to hate me," he said. And she began to get a suspicion. "Look, I've seen the girls that my parents would like to throw at me. And to tell you the truth, there's just no one among them with a brain in her head. They know nothing of literature or history. Half of them would need an accountant to do simple math. NONE of them are trained, or have the least idea of what the training is. And none of them realize that I have a job to do. And the worst thing is that we have absolutely nothing in common to talk about."

"Uh, huh," Muriel replied. That chill was beginning to get colder.

"Look, I need someone to keep them off my back. Someone that's a friend. That isn't afraid to tell me that I'm wrong," he said.

"An artificial girlfriend," Muriel said.

"An . . . NO! Well, not like that. Just someone . . . ," he ran out.

"Just someone you can parade around once in a while to show that you're going with someone. A lie," she said, quietly.

"You know, Ted fears your smiles, because it means somebody's going to get it, and he hopes it isn't him. Me," Taylor said, "I fear your quiet voice. Because I've seen it in action. It means that someone has just stepped in it, and is about to be reamed out, quietly, but so

thoroughly that they'll never dare show their face in public. And right now, I'm afraid it's me."

"You could be right," Muriel said. "Oh, I understand what you're trying to do. But you're going about it the wrong way. Taylor, you're a friend. And I value that friendship. And for that reason I CAN'T go along with a lie, as it would only tear us apart. Find someone with an at least halfway decent personality and give her the training. Get her connected as deep as you are. Then ask her to be your girlfriend. But no lie. Girlfriends aren't necessarily forever, you know. People change, grow apart, lose interest in each other."

"Muriel, it's an impossibility. The girls that my parents would approve of are all of a type that I'd rather not associate with. They're flighty, greedy, selfish, self-centered children at heart."

"There must be someone that you can at least talk to!"

"There is. One. And she's just told me off, roundly, and with good reason," Taylor said.

"Oh Look, Taylor, they'd never fall for it. I'm an American citizen and a commoner. They'd never accept me as your girlfriend. Even a casual one."

"Um . . . they might. You could be made a British citizen. Just as you were made a Citizen of Home – an honorary citizenship," he said.

"But I'd still be a commoner," Muriel replied. "And you're a prince."

"And, if you weren't a commoner? If you were somehow elevated? At least enough to appease my parents?" he asked.

"Then . . . then I might consider it," she said.

"Well, my grandmother, the Queen, asked me to give you this. She meant to give this to you, before, but every time you've been in Britain, it's been a little unsettling, and you always got away before she could. She thought, maybe, it would be a good idea if I gave it to you. It's actually the reason I was here when this blew up, today, and I called out the troops to defend you," Taylor said, and handed her a document and a little red book. And Muriel's chill returned. "As you hold the lands by name for Home, you were granted a title and citizenship for your efforts in resolving difficulties in Britain. And the passport is a diplomatic one, that goes with the status of Ambassador that she granted you in your first audience with her. So, will this allow you to consider being my girlfriend?"

"Taylor . . . this is a lot to consider. I have a JOB to do. I can't go around being arm candy to keep the wolves at bay," she said.

"That's not exactly what I'm asking, Muriel. Look, just think about it, like I know you can, from all sides. Then let's talk. I promise I won't pressure you," he said.

"Much," she replied. "Oh, all right, I'll think about it. I'll give you a call when I'm ready

to talk.”

“Good. That's all I can ask,” he replied. “I'll be in Guest House.” She gave him a very sharp look. “I've been ordered not to return until I get an answer from you. My grandmother's orders. I can't very well go against them, can I?” And Muriel gave a snort of a laugh.

Chapter 21

Confrontation with the 'Rent

(Monday afternoon)

"Hello, dear," Lily sang out as she came into Muriel's office. "Why, whatever can be the problem? Surely not those nasty people this morning!"

"No," she replied. "Nothing like that."

"Well? What is it, dear," her mother asked.

"Primogeniture," Muriel replied. "Taylor was here."

"Oh? More exercising his testosterone?" asked her mother, playfully.

"I wish. No, something worse. He wants me to be his girlfriend. And yea, I told him that I'm American and a commoner. Gad! I thought this was all settled years ago. But he found a way around it," Muriel replied and showed her mother the document and passport.

"Oh," Lily said, reading the document. "Oh, dear! I see what you mean. Duchess. Well, that certainly puts a different slant on things. What are you going to do?"

"That's what I have to figure out," Muriel said. "I have a job to do. And that takes most of my time. I can't just gad about, showing off to the media that I'm arm candy to a Prince."

"Have you talked to him about it?" Lily asked.

"I told him I'd think about it," Muriel said.

"But instead of thinking about it, you worried about it," her mother said. "How about thinking about when you're NOT busy? You normally keep pretty regular hours. Oh, I know, you're on call all the time. But you aren't called out all the time, and the chances are that he's the same way. And, I bet, if you asked, he'd find a way to let the media know where you were going to be, some evening, just having dinner together, like a regular girl. Dressed up fancy and your hair done special, or in grungies and grabbing hot dogs from a vendor. Anything."

"Mother! Are you trying to set me up with a boyfriend?" asked Lily's daughter.

"Nope. I'm trying to help you help a friend. You may not know it, but there's nasty rumors in the British press that maybe he's unable to be with a girl," her mother said.

"Oh. OH! And by my just going out with him, sometimes, it would squelch the rumors. Especially if I was in civilian clothes," Muriel said.

"Uh, huh. So . . . why don't I get out of here, so you can call him back and actually talk

to him. Huh?" Lily asked.

"Oh, mother, you don't have to leave," Muriel said.

"Actually, I think I do. You certainly know how to behave. And if you don't, then it's too late for me to teach you. And you don't need a chaperon. What you need is a way to be yourself, and still put on a show," Lily said. "Have Carla help you with clothing, hair and makeup. Oh, not much. Just enough to make you even more striking than you are, and to give the media something to REALLY talk about." And Lily translated out before her daughter could think of anything else to say as a stall. First real date with a boy is always traumatic. If she could just think of it as being out with a friend, instead of a boy, she'd be fine.

"Mata?"

"Nope. I'm staying out of this one. I don't have the knowledge or experience that your mother has. And she IS right. You need to get out more and just be you," Mata said. "So, call your boyfriend."

"MATA! He's not my boyfriend. Yet." But Muriel called Taylor, and he was immediately in her office.

"GEEZ! You didn't have to break the sound barrier," Muriel said.

"I didn't want you to have a chance to say you didn't want to see me," Taylor said.

"Look, about that. I'm sorry. It was a rough morning, and I wasn't thinking right. That's not an excuse, but it is a reason," Muriel said. "Also, my mother told me that you've got a rumor machine going on, and that my presence could help. Especially if I play it up a bit. Civilian clothes and such. Do you think you could make reservations that would just happen to leak to the media for tonight?"

"For 'His Royal Highness, Prince Taylor', they'd jolly well clear the building if I asked. But I think I see what you mean. Civilian clothes, though. I'm not sure I have any."

"Well, I know a clothier that could help you with that," Muriel said. "And it's likely that he knows British styles, too, or could come up with something that looked civilian but wasn't anything like any standard style. Just give me an idea of how dressy you want me to be."

"You're kidding! No, you're NOT kidding. But I thought you never wore a dress," Taylor said.

"Oh, I wear dresses. Just not when I'm being official. And your grandmother's audience was definitely an official time," Muriel said.

"OK, let me see if I can make arrangements, quick, then I'll be back to see about clothes. Oh, how do I find him?" asked Taylor, and Muriel sent him the image of the shop. "OK, good. And if I can get in where I want, it would be fancy. A rich and famous, glamorous

lady wouldn't be out of place."

"Gotcha. Oh, and how outrageous do you want me to be?" she asked.

"Now, you've got a point, there," he started.

"Um, no, I think you are the one that has the point. I'm sure Fran said something about that to me a couple of years ago," Muriel said, and watched him blush. "GAD! I love watching you turn red like that."

"That was nasty, Muriel."

"Yea, but it was so much fun. I'm starting to look forward to this. So, am I supposed to be the prim little girl? Or the outgoing and outrageous Ambassador on her night off?"

"Better stick to outrageous. I think being a prim little girl would cause you to go into an epileptic fit," he said.

"OK, how rich? I'm supposed to be a Duchess. Should I wear a tiara or something?"

"Well, if you could keep it a bit simple. This isn't that formal an occasion. But yes, if you could manage it," he said.

"Hmm. Get with me after you're fitted, and we'll talk about it. I see a possibility right out of fairy tales," Muriel said. "Matching circlets, but your's in gold and mine in silver. And if people worry about your spending British money, you can always say I gave it to you as a gift."

"OK. Then let me get that reservation, and then get to the fitting," he said, and translated out, and Muriel immediately translated to Carla's new office.

"Relax, Muriel," Carla said, before Muriel could turn really frantic. "Mata warned me, and I've got some ideas. I've also passed some to our friends in the clothing industry, and we've come up with fairy tale outfits that will look well together and take the theme of sun and moon, without being garish. This is going to be a bit more mature than you've worn, before, though," she added leading Muriel back toward the fitting rooms.

"In fact, the most mature part of it will be the most difficult and the most subtle," Carla went on. "And that's the makeup that won't look like makeup but will make you look more mature and somewhat mysterious. The dress, though is right out of a senior prom style, but slightly more mature in it's . . . accentuations. It's not one you can wear a bra with."

"WHAT!"

"Calm down," Carla laughed. "It won't fall down, it will support and still be comfortable, and it won't be padded. It's shields. I can tell them to do a lot, and they're happy to oblige." And so it turned out. Just barely calf length with a full skirt and a body hugging bodice. No

straps and a very low back, but the cups for her breasts extended upward in an inverted 'V' to slightly rounded tops, and between them the neckline dove to the 'V' of her ribs. Definitely more mature than she was used to. Silver tracery gave the impression of the dress being an over-tunic that divided and spread toward the hem of the skirt. The material was a very pale blue – perhaps better described as white with a slight blue cast that seemed to change depending on lighting and movement. Her shoes were low heels of the same type of material, and with some sparkle to them.

Then Carla attacked Muriel's hair and makeup. Her hair was gathered up in the back and brought back forward, poofed somewhat to make it look like candy floss, and sparkled a bit. Then the makeup, and the most startling effect that Muriel could have imagined. Carla started on her ears, adding a bit of shadow to them and covering the back edge of them with her hair a bit to make them look like they were slightly pointed and swept back a bit without actually reshaping her ears or using prosthetic devices. Eyebrows were shaped slightly to indicate an upward sweep at the outside, again without actually making them so. Muriel's freckles remained, but were made fainter, and a slight bluish eye shadow – not enough to be seen but enough to give an effect – was applied.

Carla was about to present Muriel with her silver circlet when Taylor arrived. “Oh, yes!” Carla said. “This is really going to work.” Taylor just stared at Muriel, making her feel very self-conscious. “Sit, Taylor. It's your turn.” She finally had to face a chair toward Muriel just to keep him from turning his head.

He got much the same treatment as Muriel with the exception of the hair. His ears were given the hint of back swept points and the eyebrows made to look slightly like wings just beginning a down stroke. She finished with what looked at first like a slightly deformed circlet that looked to be made out of gold wire. And across from him, one of Carla's squad placed one of silver on Muriel's head. Both circlets dipped in the front, to lend more of the up-swept look to the eyebrows. Then Carla had them both stand and Muriel got a good look at Taylor.

It was the same uniform that the Envoys used for formal occasions, but in a white with a gold cast to it. White shirt with a tie the same as the jacket and pants. On his left side was a basket-hilted claymore, and the basket was gold, with cloth-of-gold grip, in a scabbard the same color as the suit. And Muriel blushed. In looking at his pants with their gold strip down the outside, she noticed more than just the pants. They were snug enough that there was no doubt that he was male. She quickly looked back at his face and vowed that she'd never look down again. And Carla just smiled.

“OK, you two. Over by the wall,” Carla said, and directed them to a spot where the woods met the green meadow, placing Taylor on Muriel's left.

Just then, Mata arrived, took one look at them, and went into a deep, formal curtsy. “Your Highnesses,” was all she said.

Jeff, right behind her, simply said, “WOW!” then mentally called the rest of her friends. The effect on them was just as strong.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Carla said, laughing, "allow me to present Oberon and Titania, their Majesties, the King and Queen of the elves."

"Now, if that doesn't scotch the rumors, Taylor, nothing will," Mata said.

"How'd you DO it, Carla? They're themselves, but at the same time so much more and elven!" asked Tommy.

"Trade secret. Less is more," Carla said. "Now, Taylor, will there be dancing?"

"IN THIS DRESS?" Muriel asked. "I'd be afraid I'd lose something!"

"Never fear. The whole outfit is shields, now. And here's the images for you. Just pass them through to your souls, and they'll maintain them, just as they do your uniforms," Carla said, sending them the images. "Oh, and here's the way to create a falling sparkle effect, if you decide to go dancing on air. And I want a good image before you leave, so Muriel, if you'd take his arm – you know the formal method, don't you?"

"Yep. My hand lightly cupping his fist," she said, and they proceeded to so engage. "Right out of nineteenth century Britain." And the two stood there grinning at the foolishness of it all.

"Good. It's done. On your way, you two, and I expect a full report when you get back, young lady. And if you leave anything out, I'll know about it," but the effect of Carla's stern words were spoiled by her laughing. And Muriel just grinned back.

On the way out, Muriel asked Mata, "What was with the curtsy?"

"Just a gag. If you're going to play the part of royalty, you should be treated like it," Mata grinned. "Speaking of 'treated', make sure you have the Enclave credit card with you when you go. No telling what some fly-by-night elven prince can afford." And Taylor busted up laughing.

"I think she's safe," he said. "My grandmother gave me a prepaid card with enough on it to outfit and feed my entire regiment for a year. And that's out of HER funds, not out of what the government pays for the upkeep of the regiment. And this is a restaurant that I've been to, before, and I know they accept that card."

"Oh, really! You've been to this restaurant before? Who was it? Was she pretty? Prettier than me?" Muriel jabbed back.

"Well," Taylor said, "as a matter of fact, she wasn't pretty. Mainly because she was a he. In fact, several 'he's'. Half the House of Lords decided to descend on me about using 'foreign' technology that took food out of British pockets. In other words, they wanted me to contract with them for food, clothing, and arms. I basically told them that their products were inferior, and that if they wanted to compete they'd have to improve dramatically, as well as

reduce the prices they were charging. This took two hours over dinner, and I paid the bill.”

“Hmm,” Muriel said, seriously. “I think I'm going to have to teach you how to cut them off at the knees much quicker, or you'll end up without enough money to keep pressing your suit with me.”

At first, Taylor thought she was serious. Then it hit him what she had said, and he busted up laughing. “You,” he said, “are a nasty woman. I can see where I have a lot to learn about you. And to think that I thought I already had.”

“I thought that's what men wanted was a nasty woman,” Muriel said, sweetly.

“Yes, but that's a different kind of nasty. Will I ever win a battle of wits with you?” he asked.

“I don't know. Talk to me in twenty years, and we can discuss the one time you thought you won,” she replied. He just stuck his tongue out at her.

“Well, you two, you'd better get going if you're not going to be late,” Mata said.

“You're probably right,” Taylor said, “even though the owner would hold the table for me.” Then, in a pompous voice of fake British upper crust, “Shall we go, m'dear?” And they translated out.

Chapter 22

Read All About It!

(Tuesday morning)

“Oh, that was delightful,” Muriel said, as she came into her office. “Including the dancing. I didn't think any modern restaurant would even KNOW the piece they played. And I may hit Taylor up the side of his pointy little head for asking for it.”

“Why? What did they play?” asked Mata.

“The waltz from Sleeping Beauty by Pyotr Tchaikovsky,” Muriel replied. “As if I hadn't seen the animated movie that was based on that ballet and legend. ‘. . . I danced with you once upon a dream’ REALLY! How obvious could he be? I KNOW the lyrics to that song. I would have been furious, but I was having too much fun spreading sparkles all over the dance floor, and being outrageous.” And Mata laughed.

“We cleared the floor, though. It was crowded when we started, but by the time we'd gone one circuit of the floor, it was empty, and people were standing there staring at us,” Muriel continued. “I don't know why. I mean, just because we were doing classical ballroom dancing, including twirls, six feet in the air.”

Mata roared with laughter. “Oh, you didn't!”

“Oh, we did,” Muriel replied. “I think there were more media people in there than there were patrons. I swear there had to be fifty cameras. And Taylor added to the whole thing by introducing me simply as Her Grace, the Duchess Muriel.” And she broke up laughing. “Except for those times with the worst gossip papers where he introduced me as Her Majesty, Queen Titania. And I STILL don't think they got the joke. But the dance was the topper. Just like in the movies, we started off on the floor, then gradually ramped up into the air as we went around, spreading sparkle wherever we went. I think we covered every inch of the dance floor six feet up. All in a very proper attitude and serious faced, and ramped down at the end, and he escorted me back to my seat.”

“Well, in that case, you won't have any interest in these,” Mata said, teasingly.

“What's that? Newspapers?” asked Muriel.

“You'll love some of the headlines,” Mata replied.

OY! WE WERE WRONG! – The prince bags a duchess – WHO IS SHE, AND WHERE DID SHE COME FROM – ELVES EXIST! - HOME TAKES BRITAIN BY STORM

“Oh, my,” Muriel said. “Only one got it right, and that was a rag.”

“Well, this one isn't,” Mata said, and handed over a single piece of letterhead paper.

Under the coat of arms were the words:

My Dear Muriel,

We were pleased to see that you accepted my grandsons invitation to dinner, last night. And we enjoyed the performance as much as I'm sure the crowd did.

It would please us to see the costumes in person, if it wouldn't be too much trouble. Would you please attend us at tea?

And was signed at the bottom simply with his grandmother's name.

::Taylor, I think you'd better come to my office,:: Muriel sent. He translated in, and she handed him the note.

"Oh, bother!" he said. "I didn't think it would cause this much stir. But how do we come up with the outfits, again?"

"Oh, I thought you realized. When Carla sent them to our souls, it wasn't just to maintain them. We can call them up, including makeup, just as we would, clothes. It'll even take care of my hair, and add the sparkles on me," Muriel replied back. "But I think it would be a bit much to come into the castle wearing them. Perhaps pause at the door to where-ever she has tea, and change there, then put on the performance."

"Well, we're going to have to scramble to make it. She holds tea at four PM, as that ends her 'formal' day," Taylor said, "so that just gives us time to make it. It's a light meal. Actually a snack. So you wouldn't be out of line, if offered, to take a cup and a small cake. I know what your breakfasts are like."

"Good. Then let's do it," Muriel replied, and they translated to Buckingham palace, and started the process of wending their way through security.

They were stopped just once on their tour, by an officious guard that demanded identification. Muriel handed him her British passport and Home passport, and he still balked. Then Taylor produced HIS passport, and told the guard that she was with him. And anyway, she outranked even the Queen, and that maybe he – the guard – should be guarding Muriel. The suggestion that a demotion and permanent duty of cleaning out the stalls for the mounted regiments might be in order finally got them past him and to the door on time.

They stepped through, and paused. The Queen looked up and said, "I do believe I requested that you wear your costumes." Whereupon they changed to elven finery, and

Taylor formally escorted Muriel to a seat, bowed to her, and found one for himself.

“My word!” said the Queen. “Like something out of a story book! Marvelous. And you put on the attitude so well, too. But can you drop it while we talk?”

“Of course,” smiled Muriel. “But we did want you to have a taste of what the crowd at the restaurant saw.”

“Well, it was marvelously done, and whoever came up with it is a master designer,” the Queen said, pouring tea, and handing around cups.

“I’ll be sure to tell Carla that. And on the spur of the moment, too,” Muriel said. “But I only just got up a little while ago – seven hours difference, you know – and just got through laughing at the headlines in the papers.”

“Oh, those. Didn’t anyone catch on to who you were?” the Queen asked.

“One or two, I think. But the rest are still left wondering. Unless they read the competition’s paper, that is. Taylor spent the evening introducing me either as Her Grace, Duchess Muriel, or Queen Titania.”

“Oh! So it WAS Midsummer Night’s Dream that you based it on,” the Queen said.

“Well, Carla did. Come to think of it, just a moment,” Muriel said. Then sent ::Carla, can I have a copy of the image you took of us for Taylor’s grandmother?::

::Sure, Muriel. Just a second while I get it framed for you.: And true to her word, it was only a moment before the framed picture was in Muriel’s outstretched hands. Muriel held it up, and a functionary took it to the Queen.

“May I ask,” the Queen started, looking at the picture. Then, “My WORD! It moves!”

“Ah. That would be because it isn’t a photograph, but the image Carla took of us standing together, playing the part, in her office. And the image is over a short period of time. And,” Muriel continued, “as for the intentions of Taylor and myself, well, we’re friends. And friends cover each others backs. He’s helped me when I needed it. And I helped him when he needed it. Oh, we’ll continue being seen at some functions and occasions, as our duties allow and circumstances permit, to keep up the distraction for the media. But really, this was done out of friendship.”

“Well said,” the Queen said. “And well appreciated. Both by him, I’m sure, and by us. It was beginning to become a bit of a bother, and was detracting from more serious things that needed to be done and should have been reported. And now, I’ll let you go, as I’m sure there are things you need to do. Taylor, thank you for bringing her.” And with that clear dismissal, Taylor rose and bowed, and Muriel rose and gave the Queen the nod of equals. Then they translated out to Muriel’s office, and changed back to their normal clothing.

"Well, that went well," Taylor said.

"Yep. I thought so," Muriel replied.

"Really! I know why I thought so. But may I ask why YOU thought so?" he said.

"Simple. She didn't drop the picture, and she didn't choke and start asking more questions when I said we were just friends, and friends help each other," she replied.

"Amazing. Why those two?"

"Simple," she said. "If she'd dropped the picture when she saw it move, it would have made her upset for having made a social gaff. Instead, it startled her, and that's all. So, she's getting used to the idea that, around Envoy trained people, things are apt to be a bit different. And as for the friendship thing, it shows that I'm not out after a crown, that I understand the situation, and that friends can cover each other's backs without it meaning more than just friendship. So, she doesn't need to worry about some long lasting love affair from which she might have to extract you, or that might cause more trouble for the Royal Family. Once her worries were salved, we were dismissed because there really was nothing more to say."

"Wow! All that from just those two things. OK, you're right. I need to have you teach me how to do that. If you can do that with the Queen, then I can see why you said that you needed to teach me how to cut the House of Lords off at the knees quicker," he said, and she laughed.

"It's really part of my outrageousness. I don't try to be polite and salve someone's sense of propriety or fragile ego," she said. "When a bunch of dunderheads descend on me, I certainly don't have dinner with them, much less pay for it. I send them packing as quickly as possible. In the particular set of circumstances you found yourself in, before they even sat down I'd have said, 'Ain't none of your business, and you can stop telling the media rumors based on your poor ability to manufacture fantasy. Or I shall be forced to take you to court to prove your implications, to your GREAT cost.' See? Simple."

"Oh, come on, Muriel! I have to work with these people!"

"Ever think that the other way works, too?" she said. "They have to work with you, too. And you're a prince and they're merely Lords. Oh, and you're an Ambassador of a whole world, and not only adopt and manage the attitudes of that world, but even help shape them."

"Me?"

"You. Every time we have a discussion, and I listen to your ideas," she said. "And I DO listen, obviously, or we wouldn't have enjoyed such a pleasant night. We'll have to find ways to do this more often. Oh, and every time you take action on behalf of Home, you're serving to help make the policy of how Home will treat with other nations."

"You're kidding! No, you're NOT kidding," he shivered. "I never thought of it that way. I

never realized that THAT'S what you meant by my representing Home.” He stumbled to a chair and sat down.

“You didn't need to. You were simply you, and reacted to the situations as they came up. Sometimes asking questions or asking for help, which was good. But mostly just acting, which was better,” she said. “So, needing to draw it to your attention – well, I just didn't feel that it was necessary until now. But now, you need to see for yourself why you're making decisions and how you're doing it. Which means that for a while, you may want to use me as a sounding board before you take action . . . for a while. No sweat. It just means that you're trying to do consciously and for known reasons the things you have been doing subconsciously.”

“GEEZ! You're deep. You actually understand this stuff?” he asked.

“Yep. Because I went through it myself. Right up until the time I realized that I could trust my balance to help me,” she replied. “You can, too.”

“When . . . I'm going to feel stupid when I hear the answer to this, but when did you learn to do this?” he asked.

“No reason to feel stupid. I learned about a month after I got here,” she replied. “But I was under a lot of pressure that you haven't had to deal with. And I'm a different person, and react differently. Well, everyone is, really. And we all mature at different rates. And it wasn't until now that you were ready to understand this stuff.”

“And how did you know I was ready?”

“You asked. Simple, isn't it?” she replied, grinning. “Nothing to be ashamed of or to worry about. So, now, you'll spend some time looking at what you're doing and wondering if it's the right thing to do. Simple answer? Look at your balance, and it'll tell you whether what you're doing is harming people. If it stays gray, or moves to white, then you know you're fine. If it moves toward black, then you know you need to come up with a different solution.”

“Look, yesterday you came to me with a problem, and I got confused. All tangled up in my own feelings and what I THOUGHT you were asking. I asked for help, in kinda a round about way, and discovered that I was coming at the problem from the wrong direction. That I COULD help you as a friend, without any of the rest of the baggage I was carrying getting in the way. So, now we've got the appearance of something going on, to keep the media happy, while not stressing ourselves over what it all means. It simply means that we're friends, and friends help friends,” she said. “So, you see, I'm not infallible. I still need help at times.”

Taylor gave a short bark of a laugh. “You. Need help. Not likely. Muriel, you're the most together person I know. And that includes my parents and grandmother.”

“Well, actually I did need help, yesterday,” she said. “And one part of the help was getting away and having fun last night. Aside from the pleasure of pulling the wool over the eyes of the media, it was nice to just get away – go dancing – be outrageous. And for that, I

thank you. If you hadn't asked for help I wouldn't have had so much fun."

"It was fun for you?"

"Wasn't it for you? Yea, once I got my head on straight and realized there was a way I could help you, it was a LOT of fun. So much so that I had trouble staying in character while we were dancing," she said.

"Yea. It was fun for me, too," Taylor said. "And outrageous. And . . . NORMAL!"

"Yep. That about sums it up. Oh, and it worked. Look at the headlines," she said, passing the pile of papers over to him.

"Son of a gun. One of them actually got it," he said.

"Yep. And that's your staid and stodgy one. The one that's just been bought out by the American and turned into a rag. The rest of them went off on flights of fancy," she replied. "I just wish I could have seen what the audience saw when we were dancing."

"On your computer," Mata said. "You didn't know it, but you had three squads over there in stealth, creating records of the whole thing," she added, and grinned. "You should have heard them when they came back. They were roaring with laughter over the antics you'd pulled. It may be one of the best one's you've pulled. A Midsummer Night's Dream, and you made donkeys out of all of them."

Chapter 23

You Really Need to Get Out More Often

(Tuesday morning, later)

Taylor read the newspaper headlines, and glanced once in a while at the computer monitor that Muriel had turned toward the casual area. Muriel's eyes were bright with mirth over the antics they'd pulled, and she laughed once or twice at some of them. As the record wound to a close, Ted came into her office.

"OK, what did you do now?" he asked. "I've got people calling me up to ask if you're going to be the next Queen of Britain!" And Muriel laughed.

"No, nothing like that. The rumor mill in Britain was working overtime on Taylor, suggesting that there might be something wrong with him, because he didn't have a girlfriend. So, we staged a 'dinner out' event, and now the rumor mill has discovered something else to say," Muriel said. "But it took the pressure off of Taylor. Oh, and it was fun, too."

"And just how did you 'stage an event'?" asked Ted. Muriel looked at Taylor, and they both grinned.

"Why don't you sit down in your regular seat, Ted," Muriel said. "I think it would be best. Really," she added, when he hesitated. As soon as he was seated and looking at her, expectantly, she and Taylor stood – side by side – and changed. And Ted's jaw dropped.

"O-K. And you went to dinner like that?" he asked.

"And Danced," Taylor replied, and swung Muriel into a brief waltz, that had them in the air, with sparkles streaming off them. In one of the turns, Muriel noted Mata – at her desk – laughing silently. Ted still had his mouth open, and was shaking his head and laughing.

"OK," he said, as the landed. "You got me. And you're right. If I'd been standing up I'd have fallen over." Then Taylor told Ted about how he'd introduced Muriel in the restaurant and outside, to the various media.

"You two are B-A-D! No wonder people were calling," Ted said. "I can see where that would take the pressure off of Taylor. How can anyone top that?"

"I know," Muriel replied. "I LOVE making fools of the media. Especially the rumor rags that make up their news as they go along. Here," she added, turning the monitor toward Ted, "I've already seen it. This is a record that my sneaky squads took of the event. They were there, stealthed, and I didn't even know it." And she restarted the record from the beginning. Ted was curled up, laughing, long before the record ended.

"Muriel," Mata said, "You have to get out more often. It does you good to just let your hair down and be you." Considering how the dinner date was exactly the opposite of 'just

being her', Muriel got the impression that Mata was twitting her. Yet, on the other hand, being outrageous WAS 'just being her'. Which simply made her more confused.

"Actually, Muriel," Taylor said, "There are times when you could come to Britain and just be a girl, rather than being the Leader of Home. Oh, I didn't mean that you wouldn't be that, just that you could just be you, without all the responsibilities." And a cold feeling came over Muriel.

"Taylor, I think I should make one thing clear. It's nice to get a way, sometimes. But this is not something that I will give up, now or in the future. It's what I am, and I will continue. If that interferes with your plans or those of your parents or grandmother, then I suggest you either change or abandon your plans. Is that understood?" asked Muriel.

"No, no! Nothing like that. Muriel, what you do is important, I understand that. Important to the world and to you, personally. I say it now, and would be willing to put it in writing if you wish. I have no wish to see you stop being who and what you are," Taylor said. "And my parents and grandmother have nothing to do with it. You will not change, and I wouldn't want you to. For one thing, you're too entertaining as you are. But for a far more important reason, if you changed you wouldn't be you. And I LIKE who you are."

"Muriel, what's wrong?" asked Ted.

"I just feel that someone is trying to manipulate me. Trying to get me to 'give up' being who I am for some other purpose," Muriel said. "And that they're trying to use a friend to do it. No, I'll take that back. Partly. That DOES bother me. But there's something else that I can't put my finger on. And it has to do with Taylor. Not your parents, or not directly, anyway. And they're shielded and guarded. Nor you, directly, Taylor, and for the same reason. Taylor, guard your grandmother!" And Taylor shot out like he'd been burned. "Mata"

"On it. I've got a squadron of Envoys from Home in stealth around the palace, now," Mata replied before Muriel could finish asking.

"DARN! I should have asked him if his grandmother had any outside appointments, this evening," Muriel said.

"Still covered. Wait. Car coming into the palace grounds. It's got Taylor's parents, but there's something wrong," Mata said.

"You and four squads, NOW!," Muriel demanded, and, having followed Mata's thoughts, translated directly in front of the car, stopping it. By the time she got there, she was in fighting formals, complete with the fly plaid totally unfurled behind her. ::Your Highnesses, turn your shields into absolute sound baffles, and over power their strength to shield you against a possible blast!::

You in the car, she said and sent, using shields to amplify her voice. **Exit the vehicle with your hands up**. She found the switch on the sonic device – the same device that had nearly caught Melanie, years ago – and turned it off. And, as the driver and passenger hadn't

moved, she ripped the doors off and pulled them out, face planting them on the ground locked in shields so they couldn't move. And just in time. The Queen was just leaving the building, and Muriel stopped her and threw a shield around her.

By this time, Muriel was glowing with the power she was handling. Not that that would harm her any, but it did look spectacular. Taylor arrived and took over his grandmother's shield, and urged his parents to leave and get behind him and the five squads of 'Jolly Greens' that had arrived with him. Muriel stepped towards the passenger to find the detonator for the device that was certainly in the trunk of the car. Unfortunately, palace guards showed up and pointed guns at her.

"Miss, back off and raise your hands," the leader said.

Muriel looked up, and her eyes glowed black. "You're in a blast zone. I suggest, strongly, that you back off about three feet and let me do my job," her quiet voice rang out."

"Miss, I can't let you do that," he replied.

"Lieutenant, I suggest you do as she says," Taylor sang out. "She's Ambassador Muriel, THE Leader of Home, and has just saved my parents' lives."

"And just who are you to be telling me this?" the soon to be NOT lieutenant said.

"His Royal Highness, Prince Taylor, Colonel in Chief of the Regiment of Home," Taylor replied, to a chorus of 'oh, shits' from the men with the erstwhile leader.

Without waiting to see what he'd do, Muriel went directly to the passenger, and translated his clothes off of him, and onto the ground in front of her. Then began searching them for the detonator. While that was going on, two more Envoys showed up, and went to the 'boot' – the trunk of the car. Popping the lock, they looked inside and found the bomb.

"Forget the detonator," the head of maintenance for Enclave said. "We've got it disabled." But Muriel was watching the driver by that point, as he squirmed and came up with something in his hand.

"SHIT!" she shouted, and the sound of explosion came from the boot of the car. Smoke trickled out, obscuring the rear of the car, then cleared to show that there was no damage. "You've got it disabled, huh?" Muriel said, ironically.

"Bypass," said a very shaken up head of maintenance. "Sorry, Muriel. I didn't see it."

"Never mind. We managed," Muriel replied, took a deep breath, sighed, and smiled. Then repeated, "We managed. I don't suppose there's enough of it left to figure out where it was made, is there?" And she let the fly plaid relax to her back and just move with normal breezes. "Lieutenant, or whatever your rank is now, you may take these two men, but leave the detonator. I'll have my maintenance section see if they can come up with where it was made, and things like that."

Then she turned and walked through Taylor's men like they weren't there, past Taylor and his parents, and went directly to the Queen. "Your Majesty, are you all right?" she asked.

"I . . . yes, of course. A bit shaken, but quite unharmed," the Queen replied.

"Well, I suppose that it's better to have been shaken, and not stirred by the bomb," Muriel quipped, alluding to a 'shaken, not stirred' drink that a certain hero of Hollywood movies preferred. "I'm sorry I was so late getting here, but I was confused by the fact that I didn't have accurate information."

"How DID you know?" the Queen asked.

"I didn't. I'd just had a row with Taylor, then realized that the 'something wrong' that I felt wasn't about him, but about his parents. Sorry for being so rough on you, Taylor. How are your parents?" she asked.

"They're fine, now, Muriel. Thanks," Taylor replied.

"Anyway, I realized that it might have to do with you, and Taylor took off to gather his troops. And a car came onto the grounds with his parents inside," Muriel said. "And I played a hunch. Taylor's parents were meant to get the car inside the grounds, and it implied that you had an appointment with them to go someplace. So, I dropped in to see what was happening, and keep it from happening."

"Just like that?" asked the Queen.

"Just like that. It's what I do," Muriel said. "My first job is training. But my SECOND job is troubleshooting. Trying to keep the innocents from being harmed. It's also the reason why I MUST stay free to do my job. It's not something that can be taught or learned," she added, seriously. "It's just something I am."

"Yes . . . yes, I see that," the Queen said. "Lieutenant, before you take off with those fellows, I think you should know that I would be seriously displeased should they manage to get loose. Oh, and if Muriel – oh, dear. Sorry – if Ambassador Muriel needs to talk to them, make sure that they are made available."

"Thank you, Your Majesty, I may need their identifications," Muriel said. "But I don't think it would help. They're probably throw-aways. Taylor can always get them for me. Why don't you let him take you inside, and cancel your appointment for tonight."

"I'll do that," she said, still somewhat dazed, but firmly, and turned to go.

"Muriel, don't take the car and stuff out of the country. Send them to my Enclave. Oh, your maintenance people would be able to go over them, no problem. I just think it would look better if they stayed here," Taylor said.

"Good point. Got a place for them?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied, and gave her the location. She passed it to her head of maintenance, and he just smiled and lifted his hand, and he, his aid, and the car and detonator were translated out. Taylor turned and escorted his grandmother inside, and Muriel translated back to her office. Ted was waiting.

"So . . . what was that about?" asked Ted, casually.

"Uh, huh. Real cool, Ted, but it won't work. You're going to segue from that to my beating up on Taylor," Muriel said. "So, I'm going to answer both. Someone tried to kill the Queen. They failed. The Queen asked me how I knew, and I told her, it's who and what I am. And it's not something that can be taught or learned. And it's the reason I have to stay free."

"Ouch. How'd she take it?" he asked.

"Quite well, actually," she replied, in an almost surprised voice. "She'd never seen me in action, before, really. Now she had, and it was up close and personal. Oh, and the nasties had another one of those devices that scramble Envoy trained thinking. They were holding Taylor's parents in the car with the bomb."

"So, you rushed in and saved the day, again."

"More than that. I saved the Queen. And she knows it. And it's a debt that I'm not going to call in," Muriel said. "That way, there's no pressure on Taylor to up the ante. No teenage romance for the rags to rumor over. And Taylor and I can play out our little game with no one the wiser."

"OK, I'm about to stick my foot in my mouth," Ted said. "What happens if it actually turns serious?"

"Good question," she replied, sitting down and getting a cup of coffee. "And I don't have a good answer. Not now, anyway. It's something I'll have to deal with if, when, and how ever it happens. And, I'm not going to worry about it when I don't have the facts. So, Taylor and I will be seen in one place or another, anywhere from once or twice a week to once a month. And NEVER with any behavior that looks at all romantic."

"You don't have any feelings for him?"

"Immaterial. I have a job to do. He's a friend. If it develops beyond that . . . well, then we'll see. And I'll make sure you're the second . . . no . . . third to know," she said.

"Why so far down on the list?" he asked.

"Don't you think it would be best if Taylor and I are the first two to know?" Muriel replied, grinning. "Seriously though, Ted, this isn't something for you to worry about. It's something that I need to work out for myself – with or without Taylor. It's a private matter, not

something that a lot of well meaning people, some with their own agenda, should be asking about all the time.”

“But, don't you want someone to care for, and who would care for you?” asked Ted.

“I've already got that. Many times over. I have friends. I have a whole room full of Envoys. I have my parents. And, in a sense, I have the whole world to care about, whether or not they care about me. Leave it. Whether or not I have a boyfriend really is a private matter. A personal matter. It's not subject to decision by committee. It's not something that I need to have other people decide for me. Besides, I'm still too young to be getting involved in romance,”

A little black body jumped up on her lap and began circling for a place to land. This was a very careful process the kitten went through, choosing just exactly where she should place her paws for best effect, and what scents were most familiar. And the only variation in it was how long it took. After a couple of minutes, the miniature Panther lay down and curled up, purring. “And, I've got Panther,” Muriel said, “and she has me. So, you see, I'm loved. Right now, I don't need any more.”

Chapter 24

Fallout from a Rescue

(Tuesday afternoon)

“So, what happening with the political parties?” asked Muriel. “Anything new?”

“Well, actually, there is. A number of candidates just dropped out of their respective races. A number of others have denounced the 'unknown members of the party' that should so despoil the democratic process,” Ted said with a straight face.

Muriel looked at him, and said, “It must have been tremendously difficult for you to actually say that without laughing,”

“You're right,” he said, grinning. “They're totally ignoring the fact that people tried to exterminate an entire people.”

“They may not know,” Muriel said. “I wasn't aware that their actual motives were put out to the media. Oh, wait a minute. If they DIDN'T know, then why the tie to the democratic process?”

“Yep. You're fast. It took me longer to see where they tripped up. And Melanie was even faster, and they're already under investigation,” Ted said. “Some of these politicians really need to know that they shouldn't speak off the cuff unless their cuff has the notes for what they should say.”

“That was tried,” Muriel said, “Though the person used their hand instead of their cuff, from what I understand. And made so much of a hash of history and politics that the party, itself, became a laughingstock and lost the election that year.”

“Well, in any case, there are some areas where the only candidates running for office are from the little, ignored political parties. The ones that don't have the funding to be able to put out the advertising, so nobody knows the people. As a result, a number of companies are scrambling to join the line up of who will fund them, and direct them,” Ted said.

“Is Melanie following them?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, yes. So is your on duty squad and analysis team,” he replied. “And they're being nasty about it. They're feeding questions to the media to ask businesses about their position on things, which is causing a trail of evidence to be made publicly available. One of my off duty squads is doing nothing but monitor news channels and programs, and laughing as one after another the businesses stick their foot so far in their mouth that they can kick their own butt.” And THAT image made Muriel laugh.

“Oh, my,” Mata suddenly said. “Muriel, I think you should look at this,” and brought Muriel a copy of a British paper. And Muriel read it and laughed.

AMERICAN AMBASSADOR RUSHES TO THE AID OF HER LOVER

The American girl that is the Ambassador from Home came storming into the grounds of the palace allegedly to help Prince Taylor in protecting his parents and the Queen. Reliable witnesses tell us that her barbaric behavior was way over the top, ripping doors off of a vehicle and stripping one passenger in her zeal to uncover some nefarious plot. She even managed to create an explosion in the boot of the vehicle to bolster her claim that the Royal Family was in danger.

Prince Taylor stood by, watching adoringly, as this young hussy displayed a total lack of decorum or understanding of due process. He even held back his troops as she cavorted about the grounds in this unseemly total disregard for British law and flaunting American Wild West behavior. And all this due to what we're sure was a total misunderstanding of the facts.

The Prince and Princess, Taylor's parents, were in the vehicle at the time, on their way to joining the Queen in attending a concert at the Royal Albert Hall. Needless to say, this girl's antics caused them to have to cancel their plans, as well as endangering the very people she was supposedly trying to protect. Our source tells us that this child, playing at being the leader of a world, even threatened the Royal Guard, that came to investigate the disturbance.

The Prince's parents driver and guard that had been in the front seat of the vehicle are currently being held incommunicado at an undisclosed location, undoubtedly being illegally questioned in an effort to get them to confess some alleged plot, whether or not one actually took place. This total violation of the rights of British subjects and the law of the land cannot be allowed to continue, and we call upon Parliament to redress this blatantly unlawful action, and revoke permission for this person to enter the country. It is time to take back our country and reject this outlandish invasion by some American child who has no understanding of international relations or sovereign rights.

"Oh, my!" Muriel laughed. "How the mighty have fallen. And to think that this used to be one of the leading factual newspapers in the world until that American muck-raking mogul took it over. And it tries to call ME out for not fact-checking. Really, somebody ought to take this paper to task over this. This goes beyond spin. It's an outright perversion of the facts, slanted for a definite purpose."

"Muriel, I . . .," Taylor began, as he suddenly translated in. "Oh . . . you've already seen it," he added, dejectedly.

"And laughed. Taylor, the owner of this paper is well known in this country for buying decent newspapers and other news outlets and turning them into muck-raking rumor rags," Muriel said. "If you really look at it, the writing is better, but the content is pure speculation and spin. There are no facts in this report. In fact, just from the basic spin, I'd say I could even tell you who gave the report to the paper."

"No need. He's already under arrest. It was that Lieutenant that you dressed down,"

Taylor said.

“Well, actually, it was YOU that dressed him down, telling him who I was. I think that must have stung,” Muriel said. “He seemed like the type of jerk that can't stand having a woman, much less a girl, that outranks him.”

“Well, actually,” Taylor said, “it was worse than that. He's xenophobic, too. I don't think he realized that I'd been trained, though how he could miss it I have no idea. He was part of the group with the bomb. They wanted to kill my grandmother and parents, and put me on the throne.”

“Ah! Someone else that didn't do their homework,” Muriel said. “Have you rolled them up?”

“Well, not me, personally. But they're being picked up by the various territorial police and sent back to London for prosecution,” he replied.

“Not to seem uncaring, but why would anybody think they wanted you on the throne?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, well, that's easy,” Taylor replied. “I'm underage, so there would have to be someone acting in my place, a regency. And they saw themselves as being the ones. However, the fact that my parents are trained and would have survived the bomb would have defeated that idea, as my father would have taken the throne. And he'd be less inclined to be 'understanding' of these creatures than my grandmother is.”

“Look, Taylor, about this morning . . . ,” Muriel began.

“Not a problem. I understand what you're going through. After all, I'm going through the same problem, but directly,” he said. “If your little talk, at tea, didn't put paid to any ideas she might have had in that direction, I assure you that seeing you in action did. You must understand that, with the monarchy, things move at a much slower pace, and tend to be talked around rather than acted on directly.”

“Well, there is that,” Muriel said. “But, really, it's much more. I don't think either one of us is ready to make life-changing decisions like that. Oh, I know, I make them all the time and sometimes at a speed that startles others. But those are decisions that I know I can handle, and I'm always ready to be overruled. But this . . . this is personal, and can't be forced.”

“And I think she realizes that, now. Before I left her, she said that she had presumed that your upbringing was similar to mine . . . and hers. That we would do what was best for the country. Well, in your case, world. And you do. But the way you were raised was totally different – it didn't include marriage for the joining of countries in a treaty.” Taylor paused, then said, “She's willing to let it run the way you had planned. Play the part for the rumor mongers – togetherness, fights, making up, friendship in general – to keep them off base, while I look around and see what my options are and you have a chance to grow in the direction you wish.”

"You're sure?" she asked. And at his nod, continued, "OK, I can live with that. And I'm glad. I'd hate losing you as a friend."

"Not going to happen," he said. "I wouldn't allow it. I'll do whatever is necessary to keep the friendship."

"Hello, dear," Muriel's mother said, as she and Muriel's dad came into her office. "More testosterone?"

Muriel laughed. "Yea, but this time it was mine. Come in. sit. I'll tell you the tale of my misadventures. It all started with Taylor's parents and grandmother wanting to marry him off as soon as he came of age. And Taylor didn't appreciate the girls they'd picked out for him. So, since this was all for the benefit of the media that was concocting all sorts of rumors about him, we decided to do a little concocting, ourselves," she said, and put the record of their 'dinner date' up on the big screen. As it played out, Lily and Fred stated chuckling. Then laughing as they heard Taylor introduce Muriel in the two outlandish titles. The laughing turned to gasps as they watched Muriel and Taylor dance.

"Oh, my." Fred said. "Oberon and Titania, huh? But what was this Duchess, thing?" And Muriel handed over the new passport and document. "Oh, my," he said. Again.

"Yep. A whole new raft of stresses that I'm going to ignore," Muriel said. "However, while all this was going on, some not very nice people decided that it would be best for Britain if the Queen and Taylor's parents met with an unfortunate accident, so they could put Taylor on the throne as a figurehead, and themselves in charge as his counselors and guardian. So, it was my turn to 'exercise my testosterone', and save Britain from a fate worse than Taylor."

"Um . . . just as a side note, dear," Fred said, "girls don't have testosterone."

"Of course not, dad," Muriel replied. "It's all done with mirrors."

Fred snorted and replied, "Well, that explains why they're constantly standing in front of one."

Mata put down her cup, placed her elbows on the edge of the desk and her head in her hands, and just muttered, "No, no, no, no, no, no. They can't do this to me. Now they're triple teaming me," while shaking in what could be either laughter or crying.

"Mata?" Muriel started.

"Oh, I'm all right," she said. "Just that Fred took me by surprise. He's usually so laid back and quiet. But he slid that one into the conversation when I wasn't expecting it, and wasn't ready to inundate my monitor, again. I almost choked, and I hadn't even taken a sip, yet." Fred just chuckled. "Alright," Mata went on, "payback time. The reason, Fred, that girls and women spend so much time in front of a mirror is to assist you in exercising YOUR testosterone. So, it's obvious that girls have the knowledge of how to exercise it, whether it

belongs to them or not.” And Fred outright laughed.

“OK, Mata, you got me. What you're saying is that girls exercise testosterone they've acquired by eminent domain,” Fred said, and Ted busted up.

“Oh, wow,” Taylor said. “I've just been sitting quietly, here, listening to this whole sad story. And I'm amazed, even after all this time, that people can take this so lightly.”

“Gallows humor, Taylor,” Fred replied. “When one has watched as many people as my quiet, well behaved young daughter has caused to twist in the wind, one tends to see the humor in it. And after all this time I've learned that when she's outlandish she's just getting the job done. And when she ISN'T outlandish, she's STILL outlandish. And, she's still getting the job done. We laugh. We laugh at ourselves and our outlandishness. Because the alternative is to cry at the stupidity of humans. We're not taking it lightly. We're dealing with trying to stay sane in a crazy world.”

“So, you're saying that it's Muriel's job to take the pain of the world?” asked Ted.

“No,” Fred replied. “But it is her job to deal with it. As it is ours. And the humor is our attempt to deal with our own pain we feel when we have to deal with it.”

“Not to change the subject,” Muriel said.

“But you're going to, anyway,” Ted replied. Muriel just glared at him, and he laughed.

“Taylor, what do we know about these people?” she asked.

“Well, for one thing, they were started and funded by one of the American companies that's got offices in Britain. Maybe more than one. We're looking into it,” Taylor replied.

“Are any of the possibilities on this list?” asked Muriel.

“Yep,” Taylor said, looking at it. “This one is the one we have hard evidence for. These three are possibilities that we're looking into.”

“Uh, huh,” Muriel replied. “This list is the list of American companies that decided to own the political parties, and are out to exterminate Envoys and those with Envoy training. Watch your back, Taylor. The device that trapped your parents is the same as one that trapped Melanie four years ago. It's a mixture of audio signals that causes anyone that can hear it to have problems concentrating enough to mentally send for help. Or to build shields, for all that. Of course, if a shield is already built, like you and your parents maintain, then it can be changed to do other things. But that's because it's on a deeper level.”

“This is starting to get serious, isn't it Muriel,” Taylor asked.

“It's BEEN serious, Taylor,” she replied. “We've gone after businesses, religions and politics before, and thought we had the mess cleaned up. But it just keeps surfacing. And I

keep going around putting out fires, rather than finding the firebug. I'm running out of ideas."

"Maybe we're going about it the wrong way. Heck, maybe we're THINKING about it the wrong way. We're going after people," he said.

"Well, yea! Of course," she said.

"Why 'of course'? What if you turn the problem around and try to think of it from the standpoint of the people that seem to be attacking us?" he asked.

Chapter 25

Find Another Way

(Tuesday afternoon, later)

"Taylor," Ted said, "What are you trying to say? Are you saying that there's something else that's trying to control us?"

"What's trying to control us . . . it's not a who. It's a what. We, collectively, have beliefs. We have an idea of who and what we are. And when that is threatened we tend to strike back – to defend ourselves," Taylor said, reflectively, looking at the floor. "I . . . Oh, hell! I'm probably not saying it right."

"Turn it around," Muriel said, muttering to herself. "Turn it around . . . what are they thinking . . . why are they thinking that way . . . what makes them different from us . . ."

Ted looked at her, somewhat shocked, somewhat expectantly. Mata pushed her cup of grape and berry juice to the other side of her desk, as if saying that this wasn't a time for pratfalls. Tommy came in and quietly sat down, not doing anything, just waiting. Muriel looked at him. Bobby joined him, just as quietly.

"OK, bright boy," Muriel said to Tommy, "what am I missing?"

"I don't know," he replied, smiling. "Are you missing something? And where did you leave it?"

"I should have expected an answer like that from you," Muriel replied, caustically.

"Why do you fight back against people and organizations?" he asked. "What gives you the right to decide that you're right and others are wrong?"

"Evidence. I'm out to help people, and they're out to destroy people," Muriel said.

"Uh, huh. Where's the evidence? And what do you get out of it?" he asked.

"Nothing. I don't get anything out of it. And the evidence is in their actions, as backed up by a paper trail that lays out what they did or intended to do."

"Really? You're paid a substantial salary. What do you get it for? What are you doing that makes Home think you're worth that much money?" he asked.

"Training. Teaching people Envoy techniques, to try to keep them safe and healthy," Muriel replied. "Oh."

"Yea. Oh," Tommy said. "You're changing things, and it scares people. You . . . because you're the face of the change . . . are coming up with new technologies. Phones and

computers that actually do what people want. Water, clean and pure. Power that doesn't cost people as much. Cars that are indestructible and don't need gas or maintenance, or even tires. Clothing that doesn't need washing and actually fits. More. And you're teaching other people how to do it."

"Yea? So?" Muriel countered.

"It's disrupting things. People don't know what to make of it. And a lot of them CAN'T take the training. We've got about twenty percent of the population trained, now, and they're already making a difference – they're a threat to the ones that WANT the old system in place," Tommy said.

"So far, you're not telling me anything I don't already know," she said.

"Then you're not listening," Tommy said. "You've got eighty percent of the population that is scared of losing jobs. You've got all those people that have been taught, all their lives, that they're sinners and going to hell, unless they repent and give lots of money to the church. You've got a whole education block against you – no I don't mean schools, though some if is there, too. No, I'm talking about the brainwashing that society is doing to them, in order to 'keep them in their place'. And the people in power want to stay in power. Why not? After all, the laws don't really apply to them, unless they get too out of hand and get caught at something that society has been taught is wrong."

"Tommy," she said, "we can't force people to take the training. And a lot of them literally can't. And a lot of the rest are afraid of it, or feel that they can't afford the training."

"So," Bobby chimed in, "how do you teach people not to be afraid?"

"You tell them the truth about the training," Taylor said, reflectively. "You tell them it won't cost them anything. And that the training is already a part of them. You flood cities with trainers, with people that can help people through the Judgment so they have nothing to be afraid of."

"You advertise," Muriel added, softly. "Like political ads, but positive and low key, letting them know that they are all Children of Home, and have the RIGHT to the training. But where do we get the people to flood the areas? Even if we do it in sections, a city at a time, it would still take a massive number of people."

"Home," said Mata. "Oh, GAD! Now I'm thinking like you, Muriel. But really, that's the only place you can get that number of people. Set up training areas, like schools, but with a place for people to stay, food, medical if necessary. Teams of Envoys to do the training"

Muriel just looked at her in shock. Then thought. "It might work," she said. "If the government would allow the Envoys to operate like that."

"Bart's looking into it," Ted suddenly said. "I see where you two are going with this. Counter the fears, and you pull the fangs of those that would try to attack us."

"Maybe not entirely," Bobby said. "But it would certainly help."

"What about having a trained human as the 'staff' of the office, and the Envoys just being transient workers under his/her supervision," asked Taylor.

"Where do you get the trainees to cover the offices?" asked Muriel.

"I've got about two thousand of them that can train. And it would probably be easier to get them visas as British citizens than to use Envoys as the supervisors," he replied. "Just remember in your planning that I'll be using some of them in Britain."

"Something else to think about," Tommy suddenly added. "People have considered this a religion before. There may be some backlash, there, even if we call them schools. And I think 'door to door' is absolutely out. We'll have to run ads."

"Word of mouth, too," Bobby piped up. "You know, 'tell your friends and neighbors' sort of thing." Alice Wilson, from the law office, came in and quietly sat down, waiting for a break.

"I'm not going to be able to see about setting this up in Britain until late, tonight," Taylor said. "Seven hour difference, and they're so far past evening that it's night, there, now."

"No sweat, Taylor" Muriel said. "Until we get a generalized plan going, here, we can't very well pass it to other countries to modify to their needs. Oh, gad!" she suddenly said, "I'm beginning to sound like a bureaucracy. Tommy, you were right. And I didn't see it. Thank you. You, too, Bobby. We've been treating the symptoms rather than the disease. Ted, Mata, what am I missing?"

"Nothing that I can see," Ted replied. "The big thing is seeing how we can set up something in the cities. Use this as a pilot project, and see where the problems are, then go on from there. We've got personnel to flood the area. We also have medical personnel to put in the offices, to improve trainees health. That's no problem. Locations are the problem."

"Distressed areas where there are vacant buildings? And what about shopping malls where there are empty stores," Muriel asked.

"Good thought, and Bart is working on it. He picked it up from me as fast as you said it, and is exploring the idea. GOOD idea. Owners are going to want revenue, and we'd provide that, as well as upgrading the buildings," Ted said.

"Churches that Caleb was working with," Mata said. "Not all of them are against us, and they might like having their congregations trained, since that solves some of their biggest problems. And many of them are in or service the distressed areas. I've alerted him and suggested it to him. He's working on it."

"OK, then I guess all we can do is wait, and hope we get the approval and locations," Muriel said. "Keep me in the loop, so I know what's going on. I'll try not to joggle elbows."

"Muriel," Alice said, "we have a different problem. We've got a bunch of lawsuits for anti-competitive behavior – water and power are the two biggest ones. Municipalities are screaming because people are off their grid for water and sewage. Utilities are screaming because they're losing money with our installing power converters for people. We're trying to get the lawsuits combined, since they're all basically the same argument against us. Cars and software are trying a similar thrust, but they're adding patent and copyright arguments, which just don't pertain. We think we can get them killed, at least the patent and copyright arguments. But we're going to be busy."

"Need more help?" asked Muriel.

"I don't think so, but we'll keep you advised. The biggest problem we see is that we can't get the lawyers in, trained, and up to speed fast enough," Alice said.

"What about outsourcing, and making sure the contractor lawyers know that they're to follow your plan?"

"Also being examined," Alice said. "But we're not sure we can trust them to do what they're told."

"OK, for water and utilities, make sure you have the agreements we put in place in front of the judge. That should kill them," Muriel said. "Cars don't stand a chance. WE own the patents on the methods and procedures, and we license them on a no-cost, return any changes basis. What they're complaining about is that Jeff and his crew are doing a volume business, rather than a luxury business. And they think we should charge luxury prices for basic cars. In short, their luxury cars aren't. Software is another of Jeff's babies, and there all I can suggest is that you show the actual cost of creating the software, and the mark-up for profit we use. What they're actually complaining about is that we've got semi-intelligent shields doing the work, rather than CPUs and such. But again, we provide the training and the patents and copyrights free. They chose not to take advantage of them."

"That might work," Alice said. "And you're right. In every case we've offered the training and technology – and that includes the water and utilities. They refused, and we have the refusals in writing. What they didn't like is that their gross income wouldn't be as high, because they wouldn't be able to charge as much. And the fact that they're still publicly traded, and have to feed the investors. They'd never be able to justify it. OK, let me get back to the office and make those suggestions." And she translated out.

"WHEW! So, what's left?" asked Muriel.

"The President. The media . . . well, one talk show, anyway. A bunch of churches. A bunch of businesses. It's even possible that the Klan is after you. Or that sheriff we all love to hate," Mata said, smiling.

"Not the sheriff. HE'S finally in jail. What's the President want?" asked Muriel.

"He wants to know if you have any idea what's going on," Mata said. "He's got congress critters crawling all over him, again."

"Tell him we're working on it. Oh, and tell him that I know of a good bug spray that should take care of those critters," Muriel replied. Mata laughed. "So, what's with the talk show?"

"Oh, they want you to be a guest. But the timing's wrong. They want you over there now. They apparently want to tape it early. Either that or it's a private interview," Mata said. "But those are usually booked weeks in advance. It doesn't smell right," Mata said. And Muriel grinned – her shark grin.

"OK, just a second. I need to adjust something." Muriel sent her mind deep into her personal shield and was surprised to discover that, like Jeff's computers and phones, it was a semi-intelligent shield. Well, that went a long way to explain how it could filter out harmful things only on a vague reference. Finally, she resurfaced and said, "I think fighting formals are in order. Do I have an image?" Mata sent it to her, and she changed into the formal uniform and translated out.

As she translated to the wings of the stage, and out of sight of the audience, she mentally looked over the back stage area. She noted several people in police uniforms, one of which was holding a very familiar device. ::Melanie,:: she sent, ::I've got another person with one of those devices that trapped you in the President's office. And, since I was invited here, it can't be a coincidence.::

::I'll have people in there to pick up the pieces after you get done,:: Melanie quipped. ::Can you handle the device and tie up the people?::

::No sweat. I'll have to show you something after it's all over,:: Muriel returned. ::It surprised the heck out of me, but it works. Oh, oh. I think they're about to announce me. Recording . . . ::

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, we asked the woman that so polarized the country, if she would stop by and talk to us. I've just received word that she's in the studio, now. Ambassador Muriel, would you join us, please?" And applause greeted Muriel as she stepped onto the set.

"Thank you for coming, Ambassador . . . ," the host began.

"Just Muriel. If I have to start using titles then somebody's made a huge mistake and is going to jail," she broke in, sitting down next to the desk.

"Ah . . . well, I must say that you seem much younger than I was lead to believe," he started. "Do you have any idea why people seem so polarized concerning you and the Envoys?"

"As a matter of fact, I do have some ideas. Ted and a few of my friends were

discussing it shortly before I came,” Muriel said. “It would appear that some people feel threatened by some of our training and ideas.” And she felt a >click< in her mind that indicated that the device had been triggered.

“Well,” the host went on, “I’ve been led to believe that the biggest reason is because you seem to be having people arrested or killed, in violation of American laws. And that you and your leader, Ted, have some sort of government protection from being arrested for your crimes.”

“Actually,” Muriel said, “that’s not true. Yes, people have been arrested, and people that have attacked me have died. However, all the arrests were based on evidence that has and will hold up in a court of law.” By this time, the host was in shock.

“You shouldn’t be able to talk!” he said. “I was assured that you could be controlled and finally brought to justice!”

“Sorry to disillusion you,” Muriel replied. “But the device that was triggered just before your last speech no longer has any effect on those with Envoy training. In fact, the reason they’re not out here gloating is because they’re being picked up by real police. I’m in contact with the leader of the group, and he’s indicated that the ones he’s picking up are impostors. Oh, and just for your information, Ted is only one of the Leaders of Home. Not THE Leader.”

“But . . . that’s impossible! They guaranteed that it would work. They assured me that I’d be safe!”

“Well, I’m sorry to tell you that they lied. Guys,” Muriel said and sent, “would you be so kind as to bring in your catch? I think the world would like to see the faces of this group that want to watch the world burn.” And Henry led a group of handcuffed individuals onto the set. They appeared to be police from the city but were all older men, out of shape, and the uniforms didn’t fit right.

“Hi, Muriel,” Henry said. “You can relax your shield, now. Oh, and for formality’s sake,” he said, and held up his identification to the camera, then turned and faced the host, introduced himself and placed the man under arrest, reading him his rights. “You are charged with conspiracy to commit unlawful abduction and restraint of an underage minor citizen of the United States, and of an Ambassador and THE Leader of a friendly nation.”

“Henry, when you get breathing space, come out to Enclave. I have some information that will surprise you. Probably please you, too,” Muriel said. She gracefully stood and walked past the mass of fake cops to a point where the camera and audience could see her, and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for the interruption of this program, even though the cause was not of my doing. I’m afraid that the network will have to find something to fill this time slot with, as I don’t expect that your host will be returning any time soon. The United States of America has serious laws against kidnapping and attempted kidnapping. It also has serious laws about access to classified material. Both of which caused this little episode to come to the attention of the FBI. This is supposed to be a country of law – NOT a country where terrorist and criminal activities can rule. As an American citizen I support the laws of

this country. And, as the Leader of Home, I will do what I can to protect the people that look to me.”

She turned her back on the audience, and looked at Henry. “Anything else?” she asked.

“Nope,” he replied, “other than the record, of course.” She handed him the record of what had happened, and he and his people translated the would-be abductors out.

Muriel looked at the other guests, then the audience, then said in her soft voice that carried to the back of the room, “Training in Envoy techniques is a wonderful thing. It can protect a person from anything harmful. It can also allow a person to call for help without being heard. The only ones that can't take it are the ones that have something to hide. Some guilt about who they are and what they want. Usually money, or power over people. In short, bullies. Sociopaths. Consider – what are you? Can YOU take the training? It doesn't cost you anything to ask us about it. And it doesn't cost you anything to take the training. No hidden fees. No gotchas. And not much time. We hope to have stations set up that will be closer to you to come to. All it takes is your willingness to be honest with yourselves and willingness to learn.” She smiled at them all, then translated back to her office.

Chapter 26

Free Advertising

(Tuesday afternoon, later, Wednesday morning)

Muriel translated into her office, and handed Ted the record of the whole events, including her speech at the end. “How's this for free advertising?” she grinned.

Ted inserted it in her computer, and put it up on her larger screen. When he reached the end of the record, he was laughing. “You are BAD, girl. Turn what was supposed to be your demise into free advertising by demonstration.” Mata was silent, just grinning.

“Ted,” Muriel said, “how's it going with getting permission to set up training schools?”

“It's going good. We just need to come up with the trainees to man them. We can have Envoys there, but have to have human trainees as the supervisors. I was thinking of using the auxiliary Ambassadors for that,” he said. “As a matter of fact, the Federal government has absolutely no problem with it. It's the states, counties and cities that were going to balk. When they found out that we weren't taking the property out of the tax base, they backed off. What we're doing is what you suggested. Vacant buildings and storefronts. And the fact that they'd be fixed up, properly, for the next owner or lessee, just makes it more palatable for the governments.”

“OK, then we've got a plan. And I've got something that I can tell the President. So, that's for tomorrow,” Muriel said. “I've done enough damage, today.” She grinned, and translated to her apartment.

Wednesday morning dawned bright and early – well, how else would it dawn in a state with three hundred days of sunshine a year? It also came with a surprise. Muriel had to translate down to in front of Mata's desk. There wasn't room for her to get into her office. Every national Ambassador was there, along with her twelve friends and Ted. Even Melanie, Henry, Adam, Captain Zeb, Caleb and Clyde, and Sally – who had finally been made an Ambassador when she reached eighteen.

A glance past all the staring heads proved that Taylor was sitting at her desk chair, the room was that full. Muriel smiled, then reached for the shield that was her chair, and made a suggestion. Taylor came up out of it with a whoop, like he'd been goosed with a hundred volt charge right where it counted. “Naughty, naughty, Taylor. You, of all people, should know better. MY chair,” Muriel said, grinning. “Go make up another one, someplace.” And that brought chuckles from the crowd.

She translated to her desk and sat down. “I imagine you're all wondering why I called you here, today. I didn't. But I have an idea of who did,” she said, and received some muted chuckling. “OK, here's how it is. I want all of you to do something. Think of your personal shield – go deep, like you were going to give it instructions. When you get there, just say 'hi'.”

Times to achieve it varied with the individuals, but within a minute they were all staring at her in shock. “Yep. You got it. Shields are semi-intelligent. I should have realized the implications when Jeff made computers and phones out of them. You can give them a vague command, and they'll sort it out. Yesterday, when I realized that I was up against another one of those sonic devices that scramble our ability to do anything that hasn't already been done, I went into my shield to give it the instructions, but I wasn't sure how to word it. And IT took the thought and sent back assurance that I was covered. Not in words. Just in feelings. Or, maybe not even that. But it will take care of you, in ways that you may not have even thought about. That personal shield, the first shield you ever made, is a part of you. And it's ONLY job is to take care of you. Humbling, isn't it?”

“I found out something else, last night, after I'd gone to my apartment,” Muriel went on. “I called Mata up and talked to her a bit. And I got a better idea of who and what Envoys are, and where they fit in all this. Envoys are only a few levels above personal shields. Shields are created by taking power and adding the ability to do things. Again, Jeff's computers and phones should have told me this, because they're a step beyond personal shields. Or clothing. You actually only have one set of shields that are clothing. It just switches the way it appears, to suit your needs. Jeff's phones and computers have added intelligence to that level, which makes them recognizably semi-intelligent. But Envoys are a step or so above that.”

“Evolution needed a hand at that point. And slowly, the Envoys began to understand that, and tried to do something about it. So, they began trying to force the evolution by creating humans to give them broader experiences. And it took centuries,” Muriel said. A glass of grape and berry drink appeared on her desk, and Muriel paused for a sip or two. “Thank you, Mata. Anyway, Earth is nothing more than a forcing house – a greenhouse, if you will. Human bodies were designed to be short lived, so that Envoys could control the experiments and kill off ones that didn't work.”

“And then the parasite came, and everything changed. Humans were left on their own – an experiment that should have ended, to begin a new one with better connections than we had at the time. That new experiment never took place,” Muriel went on. “By the way, the reason Mata's so quiet is because she already knows what I'm saying. And, I'd imagine, so do ALL the Envoys. But they wanted me to be the one to tell you. Probably so you'd be all together, so they could catch the expression on all your faces when you found out.” This time, the chuckle was a nervous one.

“They can communicate?” asked Jeff. “I mean, the semi-intelligent shields?”

“You're quick, today,” Muriel replied. “Yep. Of sorts. They certainly understand what we want. And, apparently, they understand when we appreciate them. Oh, and all those semi-intelligent shields? They have the capability of being expanded to full intelligence. Though I don't think I'd appreciate my chair making comments about my butt when I sit down.” And, this time, she got laughs and with a lot less nervousness.

“It also explains,” Mata interjected, “why Envoys are so eager to work for you people. You DO appreciate them, and feed them experiences that they wouldn't otherwise have. It's

like a drug. Once you start, you can't give it up. Addictive. You make us stretch, and learn, just by the way you interact with us. It was that appreciation you show that drove the Envoys of Home to name Muriel as a leader. Not to put down Ted, he taught us a bunch. But Muriel had that appreciation of the young. Everything was new to her, so she showed the appreciation more, and pushed herself to provide even more experience for us."

"Is THAT why I advanced so fast?" Muriel asked.

"I think so," Mata replied. "At least from the feedback I've been getting from others."

"So," Ted said, "we're back to 'be like children'. And that explains how Anna advanced so fast. Her security chief and squads fed back into her because she appreciated them."

"Yep. Taylor, too. He was still young enough, mentally, to not take things for granted," Mata said. "Well, I could be wrong. So could about a few billion Envoys. But I don't think so."

"So, where do we go from here?" asked Ted.

"Just be a little more conscious of what your shields and Envoys do for you," Muriel said. "Remember when my squads put together and office and apartment for me from just vague ideas? They nailed it, baring minor things that changed over time, and improvements that we all fed into. And it was my amazement and wonder at all they'd done – my appreciation – that cemented them solidly to me. Well, now that we've got that out of the way, I need to let the President know what's going on, and why, and how. What's the status on the teaching stations?"

"Good," Ted said. "Absolutely good. We've got the locations, on lease. Since these are commercial leases, the owners offered to make some changes and improvements for us. We countered with the fact that we could do it faster and better, and that they'd be permanent improvements. That knocked anywhere from one month's to six months rental fee off the cost, up front. The teams assigned went in and did the basic improvements last night, and are just waiting for the human supervisor to finish up."

"I offered, before, to loan you some of my troops to help," Taylor said. "We're keeping out about two hundred for stations around Britain. Oh, and the hundred at my Enclave that are the core force. My grandmother contacted your state department, and we can get as many visas as we need. Or, and this was THEIR offer, the 'Regiment of Home' identification would be accepted as authorization to enter America."

"You may not need to, Taylor, unless you think it might be good to do a two way swap. We've got about a thousand Marines that are willing to be supervisors," Melanie said. "I have no idea how they found out about this, but my secretary was fielding calls all afternoon from retired or inactive reserve Marines that had already gotten permission to use the uniform for this."

"What about other countries?" asked the Ambassador to France.

"Set it up the same way. If you need backing, we're available," Muriel said. "We hadn't expected to start other countries this soon. We were going to test this, here, first, to file off the rough edges. But we're not going to stop you from doing the same in your countries. Home will supply additional Envoys, as needed. But you know, better than we do, what your needs are. How'd you hear about it, anyway?" asked Muriel. Then looked over at Mata, who was doing a ceiling inspection, with support choreography from the squads in the break room. The on duty squad was VERY studiously hard at work. Apparently. Muriel snorted, then broke up laughing.

"You put it up on the net – on the hive mind – didn't you?" Muriel asked.

"Um . . . well . . . um . . .," Mata said.

"That's TWO 'ums' and a 'well'," Muriel said. "You DID do it."

"Bart did, too," Mata shot back, like a kid trying to get out of being punished.

"You leave me out of it," came Bart's voice from the air. "I was just following what you told me to do!" By this time, the crowd was laughing at the antics of the security chiefs and Envoys.

Muriel put a hand to her eyes, and said, "Children! Behave yourselves. Sheesh! What I have to put up with. All right, you two. No harm done, I guess. It's out. We'll deal with it. Is there anything else, people? No? Then let me get back to work. Or at least have a cup of coffee and LOOK like I'm working," she added, and they laughed and began filing and translating out.

Melanie and Henry stayed. Muriel looked questioningly at Henry. "We traced back to where that device came from," he said in reply to her unspoken question. "We're checking, now, to see if they let it out into the wild, but we don't think so. This was a company hit, Muriel. One of the ones that's trying to sue you." He passed Muriel the name of the company.

"Give me hard evidence on that, Henry. Or give it to my lawyer. That may be something we can use in court."

"You got it," he said, and translated out.

Before Muriel could even turn to Melanie, she said, "The President will see you any time you want to go. He said he'd even throw out whoever is in his office, if you feel that it needs to be private."

"Whoosh! He's really anxious to see me, then," Muriel said. "Any idea what it's about?"

"Yea, he's getting pressure from various lobby groups and businesses to 'eliminate the Envoy problem', to quote one of these jerks," Melanie said.

"So, who's he got in with him, now?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, you'll love this," Melanie replied. "It's the CEO of the company that Henry told you about."

Muriel grinned. "Yes, that IS interesting. I don't suppose you have an image of him, do you?" And Melanie passed her the image. "Oh. Him. No problem. Warn the President, and make sure he knows that I don't mind his company being there."

Melanie looked blank for a second, then said, "There isn't going to be any problem, is there?"

"Oh, not at all. He'll bluster, I'll cut him off at the knees. NO problem," Muriel said, sweetly.

"OK, I'll warn him," Melanie said, indicating the President. "OK, he says 'come ahead'. I'll just take up my usual corner of the oval office."

"You know, every time I hear that old joke – corner of the oval whatever room – I still chuckle," Muriel said. "It's the sort of absurdity that I use, a lot. Let's go." And they translated out.

Muriel, by design, found herself sitting in a chair facing the President's desk, and next to the CEO Melanie had told her about. "Hi, Mister President. Sorry I'm late. I had an unscheduled Ambassadors' meeting to attend."

"How do you manage to have an UNSCHEDULED Ambassadors' meeting?" he asked. "Oh, and hi to you, too, Muriel," he added, and grinned.

"Oh, that's simple. We'd been setting up how to get more people trained, and my ever vigilant security chief put the whole thing up on the mass mind of the Envoys. So, of course, Security chiefs all over the world let their principals know, and they all decided to gang up on me. They're sorted. And we're right on schedule, or maybe a bit ahead."

"MISTER President!" The CEO interrupted. "I must protest this . . . woman . . . being here."

"Ah," Muriel said, brightly. "I didn't see you there. Let's see . . . Chief Executive Officer of the big oil company that is suing us, I believe. The one that set up a poor talk show host as a patsy for your hit squad. Sorry, it didn't work. I'm sure you'll hear more about that, later, from your lawyers. I didn't realize that you were also a misogynist."

"MISTER PRESIDENT!"

"Stop bellowing. I'm right here. And you didn't bother telling me about the hit squad failure in your diatribe. Did you really think that would succeed?" asked the President.

"Oh, don't worry about it, sir," Muriel replied. "He won't be around long enough for it to matter. Or his company, for that matter. Unfair competition, indeed. There IS no competition. They've been setting up the whole price gouging scheme for so long that it's gotten tiresome. And now, when they get some healthy competition, they complain because their exorbitant bonuses are at risk. Our counter suit will do them in. So," she added, "what else did you want to see me about?"

"The schools are going ahead?" the President asked.

"Yep. Should be up and operational by the end of the week. I believe Mata is planning some sort of advertising to go along with it. Once should be enough," Muriel said. "After that, word of mouth should pretty much take care of it."

"And these lawsuits you mentioned? I hadn't heard about them," he asked.

"No sweat. Unfair competition doesn't stand a chance. We're charging the standard market markup over the cost of manufacture or whatever," Muriel said. "That's always the way it's been. And the copyright and patent violations that some are trying to claim are worthless. We aren't using their copyrights or patents, and what we are using is copyrighted and patented by us. So, counter suits for defamation of character, along with frivolous lawsuit charges should take care of them. Besides, most of the companies involved in the lawsuits haven't anything to complain about, since we offered our patents and copyrights at an unbelievable cost – free. Well, we believe it, even if they don't." And the President laughed.

"Are you really going to sink this company," the President said, indicating the CEO.

"Of course," Muriel replied. " 'You know my methods, Watson.' Anybody attacks us physically gets put down hard. I expect his company to be in receivership by the end of next week. Just the charges of attempted kidnapping and assault should take care of that. We don't waste time with petty sociopaths that can't understand that the world has changed. The sooner that 'investors' understand that the bottom line of ANY company is the grave the better."

"And just what do you think you'll do if all the companies withdraw oil and gas from the market?" the popinjay CEO asked.

"Sell more cars. Sell more power conversion units. Make adapters for current cars, and offer them at a nominal cost," Muriel replied. "There really isn't anything you can do to us to hurt us. We're giving you a chance to learn, to change, and to benefit. You're the ones that aren't taking the opportunity to do so."

"You're a hard woman, Muriel," the President said.

"You know? That's interesting. The only time I ever hear that is when someone's been attacking me, and I attack back," Muriel said. "Could it be that people just don't understand that women can be stronger than men? That they can take initiative, and not just knuckle

under to a male dominated society? Naw. Couldn't be that." And the President laughed.

"Well, young lady, I think you settled BOTH these meetings. You," he said, pointing to the CEO, "you can get out of my office and quit bellyaching. In fact, my secretary will be notified that you are NOT to have another appointment with me unless you manage to change your ways. I'm tired of hearing how your precious profit is going away because you have to compete with someone."

"YOU! You can't do that! You're cutting off a major supplier of your campaign funds," the CEO said.

"Second Term. Try to keep up. And if you mean the party . . . well, I've got a few things to say to them, too," the President said.

And with that, the CEO rounded on Muriel. "This is all your fault!" he said, making a grab for her.

"Melanie," Muriel said, tiredly, "does this count as assault?"

"Damn straight, it does!"

"Catch." Muriel said, and hit him with a charge while releasing the 'sticky' on her shield and literally shooting him across the room. Two of Melanie's men intercepted, cuffed the CEO, and translated him out. They were back in seconds, which meant they passed the man off to uniformed officers. "Well, Mister President, I suppose I should get out of here and let you get some real work done. Besides, Taylor's sitting in my chair, again," she said with a grin. "Oops. I DID warn him. MY chair," she said and sent. "But he described such a beautiful arc." The President looked puzzled. Melanie just laughed.

"I'll tell you later, sir. Or better still, I'll show you," Melanie said. "I think that young man has delusions of possession."

"He'll WISH he was possessed if I catch him doing it again," Muriel said, then waived at the two and translated out.

Chapter 27

The Rocky Road of Friendship

(Wednesday afternoon)

“Taylor, I did warn you,” Muriel said, translating in. “And, if you were hoping that I'd just land in your lap, you're sadly mistaken.”

“What? . . . I . . . NO! Nothing like that. I was just looking up something,” he stammered.

“Uh, huh. You have one of Jeff's phones? You know that it's as powerful as a desktop computer? That it can do all the things the desktop can do? So why did you need to use mine?” Muriel asked. “I'm beginning to think that, maybe, you were trying to find out what I might be working on. Or, to put it another way, snooping.”

“What? . . . I . . . Muriel, is this the way it's always going to be, between us?”

“Yep. And you're changing the subject. Answer the question. Why were you in my chair, at my computer,” she said. “What did you find?”

“Nothing. It wouldn't let me in,” he said in a sulky voice.

“Uh, huh. And considering what I told you about shields, and particularly about semi-intelligent shields, why do you think you couldn't get in?” she asked.

“Oh. It wouldn't let me in because I wasn't you.”

“Good. Got it in one,” Muriel said. “It can't be hacked in from outside, either.”

“Were you really mad at me for sitting in your chair?” he asked.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“I . . . look, it won't happen again. I'm sorry. I think I just finally understood. There's no way I can be like you – I could never take your place. You're always two levels beyond everyone else,” he said.

“Why?”

“What?” he asked.

“Why am I two levels beyond everyone else?” she replied.

“I don't know!” he said, emphatically. “It's something you do! You just seem to do it instinctively.”

"Nope. Not even close," she said, sitting in her desk chair. "When I came out here, I was beaten down by two things. The first, of course, was the bullies. But the second was the way things were taught in school. Then I came here, and learned how things were connected. And shortly after, what constitutes evidence in court. I can spin a fantasy as well as anyone. But having something to hang that fantasy on is more difficult. Evidence. So, I don't go talking about what I think until I've got some demonstrable evidence for it. Anna does it, too, you know."

"Oh, now THAT'S just cruel," he said. "You're as much as throwing a challenge at me to do the same."

"What matters isn't what I throw, but what you catch," Muriel said. "How'd I manage to goose you out of my chair when I wasn't even there?"

"You pre-programmed it?"

"Uh, uh," Muriel replied. "If that had been the case, you'd have gotten the point immediately."

"Ouch. OK. Wait a minute! Are you saying that you spotted me from across the country, and told the chair to do that?" Taylor asked.

"Think about what you just said."

"Yea. You did, didn't you," Taylor mused. "I take back what I said about two levels. It's more like six."

"Haven't you played with your new toys at all? This is all extensions of the basics," Muriel replied. "If you're here tomorrow, I want you to come up with ways of doing three impossible things."

"You're kidding!" he said. "No. You're NOT kidding. OK, WHAT impossible things?"

"Your choice. But your work. No cribbing off of somebody else. You can build on something that somebody else has done, but what you do has to be original and has to have appeared to be impossible to do," she said. "No . . . I'll take it back. Taylor, I can't force you to think. And I can't force you to do homework. So cancel that 'three impossible things' bit. You have to learn at your own pace. And, I have work to do," she added, as an obvious dismissal.

"Muriel, I . . .," Taylor began.

"Muriel, we just killed a bunch of the lawsuits," Alice interrupted, translating in. "Oh, sorry, Taylor. I didn't see you there."

"It's OK. I was just leaving," he said, somewhat dejectedly, and translated out.

"I interrupted something, didn't I?" asked Alice.

"Not really," Muriel replied. "Taylor has some 'unresolved issues' that he needs to deal with. And he wants someone else to deal with them for him. And I'm not going to do it. I think he was winding up to try a different approach, and I just don't want to hear it. It's something that he's going to have to solve."

"Oh, well, in any case, we just consolidated a lot of the trials and pushed through a bunch of JMOLs. Sorry, Judgments as a Matter Of Law." Alice explained. "The court accepted the fact that we weren't using the copyrighted or patented material of the businesses, and threw those out. Then looked at the 'anti-competitive' argument, and the fact that in every case we'd offered the technology to the companies, free, and threw THOSE out. So, what I thought was going to be a busy time just collapsed around us."

"Now, THAT'S GOOD news," Muriel replied, grinning. "It means that the courts are finally realizing that what we're doing really isn't infringing on anyone else. Thanks! I needed that." Alice looked at her, quizzically, then shrugged and translated out. "Mata, who's working on the advertising for the training centers?"

"Frederica has someone on it," Mata replied. "I think they're ready to go with it. Want me to check?"

"No, that's all right. I'll go talk to her. I need to get out of the office for a bit, anyway," Muriel replied, and translated out. At Triple E, Muriel got ahold of Frederica, and found out that the advertising was ready to go as soon as she got word that the training stations were ready to operate. Further, that the individual Triple E branches would be handling the advertising for their respective countries, and for the same reason. So Muriel translated to Ted's office.

"Ted?" Muriel started.

"Not yet," he replied. "The offices are ready, but not fully staffed, yet. If you like, I can signal Frederica as soon as they are, and then let you know."

"Oh, would you, please? That would take that load off me," Muriel said with a smile. "I just feel like I'm wandering around, trying to cover all the bases, today."

"Well, I know that feeling," Ted said with a laugh. "I've had a few of them, myself. Fortunately, today isn't one of them. I can do that, easily."

::Muriel,:: Mata sent, ::the President's here to see you.:: Muriel excused herself, and translated to Mata's desk, then walked into her office.

"Mister President! To what do I owe the honor?" she asked, as she sat in her recliner.

"I was just wondering why you were picking on the oil companies, now," he replied.

"Well, sir, I don't know if you realize it, but I never pick on someone that hasn't already picked on me. In the case of the oil companies, we went to them and offered them several ways that they could improve their product, improve their production methods and even how they could get out of oil altogether. We were rebuffed as being fakers, without even a trial to show what we could do for them," Muriel said. Then went on, "About a month later, we started getting lawsuits aimed at us for anti-competitive behavior. They each resulted in summary judgments against the oil companies. We just recently got another one, along with several from utilities and water, and car and computer and phone manufacturers all at the same time. According to Alice, they were all tossed on Judgment as a Matter of Law. Basically, someone is out to get us any way they can."

"How can you be sure of that?" he asked.

"Because someone was planning to try to kill us," she replied, "and managed to kill a bunch of their people, instead. And those people all were being funded by the same people that just tried – and failed – to sue us. And because yesterday, they tried to grab me during an interview on a talk show. And that one had direct ties to the particular oil company whose CEO was sitting your office, and got arrested for assault."

"Oh."

"Yea. Oh. Mister President," Muriel said, "I can understand your concern, but it's misplaced in this case. The government keeps putting people in jail for some of the nastiest crimes imaginable, and they all tie back to both politics and major corporations. You have a problem, sir. But we're not it."

"You know that I've been asked to have you people leave the country"

"Really? Deported back to where we came from? Do you remember WHERE I came from, sir? I'm already back where I came from," Muriel said. "Did the people that asked you to deport us happen to mention what was to be done with those that are American citizens?"

"Um . . . no," he said.

"Well, I don't know, either, but I'd bet that it involved either imprisoning us or killing us. Neither will work, you know," Muriel said. "Last night, they tried to capture me using one of those sonic devices that trapped you and Melanie in your office. You notice that I'm not captured? You notice that the host of the program has been arrested? Along with the people that were supposed to do the physical work of capturing me? Arrested by the FBI, by the way. And do you remember who it was that turned off that 'wonderful weapon' that they were going to use on Envoys and Envoy trained humans? Me. I'm still here. Sir, have you ever heard of Benjamin Franklin?"

"Well, yes, of course. Very intelligent person, from what I understand. I mean, I never met him, but I've heard of the things that he did and worked on," he said.

“Uh, huh,” she said. “Did you know that he is said to have defined insanity? Yep. He said that insanity was doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. And that's what these people are doing. They keep trying the same things, and they DON'T WORK! These people are five cans short of a six-pack. They're trying to play fifty-two pickup with only one card. It isn't that they've got a screw loose. It's that they can't even FIND the screw. Sir, you've got a whole bunch of people in high positions in business and politics that are fundamentally insane. And until the world recognizes that, and that they either need to be cured or put someplace where they can't do any harm, we're going to keep going through this same conversation. AGAIN!”

“Sir,” Muriel suddenly changed the topic, “did you happen to check your balance before you came out here to talk to me?”

“Um . . . no, why?”

“You really should have. This conversation has had the potential to seriously harm every Envoy trained human on the planet. Your balance is there to help you. But if you don't check on the potential for harm by looking at it, then it can't help you,” Muriel said.

“Oh.”

“And, on top of that, sir, it had the potential to harm Home – a whole world of people that are doing nothing more than trying to help you,” Muriel added. “You've got a whole lot of certifiably sociopathic people in positions of power – high positions in business and politics. And they're out to get us. We only go after them when they try to take action against us. And we only use the tools that are comparable to what they use. Where they try law, we use law. Where they try physical force, we use enough to stop them, then turn them over to local authorities such as the FBI. But we can't get ahead like that, because we can't go in ahead of time and remove them from those positions. It would not only be against the law it would be unethical. One way that you can help is to use the balance to see whether or not a particular course of action would result in harm. It's what it's there for.”

“We're doing what we can, sir,” Muriel continued. “We're training people in the Envoy techniques, and teaching them to use the balance. But it's a slow process. And, until it reaches a certain point, it has little effect on the way business and politics are run.”

“So, how do you spot these sociopaths?” he asked.

“By their behavior, mostly. Sometimes by their speech. If either one indicates that they're only out for themselves and have no regard for the general population, then it's a better than even bet that they're sociopathic,” Muriel said. “There are some that simply parrot the words and actions of others, that aren't actually sociopathic, themselves. Those can be turned. They can be convinced to ethical behavior. A true sociopath can't. They can't even conceive of the possibility that they might be wrong.” The President straightened up in his chair.

“I see,” he said. “I think I've taken up too much of your time, Muriel. And I'm sorry.

You're right. And I should have seen it before. Now, all I have to do is figure out what I'm going to do with them, and how," he added. Then he translated out.

"Muriel," Mata said, "before you beat yourself up over having to have been that hard on him, there was a reason for this meeting. Some of the members of the Supreme Court have been after him, lately. And this business with big oil was the most recent event. Trying to cause him to doubt himself. I've sent a record of this to Melanie, and she's going to see what she can do to bolster his ego and get him to stop the self-doubts and start checking his balance."

"Mata . . . thank you. I was beginning to wonder if I'd blown it."

"Nope. You told him what he needed to hear. And maybe more than that. You gave him the key to being able to understand where a person is coming from. Whether they're actually concerned for the people, or only out for themselves," Mata said. "You did good."

"Thanks."

Chapter 28

Training Begins (Thursday)

"OK. They're live," Ted said, coming into Muriel's office. "Frederica's already called the media. Come to find out, we had to buy at least a day's worth of advertising. So some of it will be during prime time. The stations already had the ads, and the local said that the first one should go up in about ten minutes."

"That fast!" Muriel replied. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Well, neither was I. But the offices are manned and open, and some of them have already gotten their first potential trainees," Ted said. "Thank goodness for Frederica. She coordinated the whole thing."

"Yea. She's good," Muriel said. "Oh, I don't know if you heard. I only heard about it, myself, just before I went to my apartment for supper. Frederica told me that some of the auxiliary Ambassadors that we've got working the training stations are thinking about going full time, if we'll let them. Set up their own Enclaves, and such. Small ones. Just enough to handle trainees and hand out diplomas and passports. So, the question is, do we let them? And how do we supervise them?"

"Good question. Can we stall them? Pulling training detail might cool the idea some," Ted replied.

"Well, that isn't all they're actually doing. They're also installing converters. Well . . . the Envoys are, anyway. And they're an outlet for phones and computers," Muriel said. "A lot of the stations are in depressed areas, and the people are really struggling. Oh, and they're helping the police in those areas. At least, that is what they're set up to do, according to Frederica. I just hope we haven't bitten off more than we can chew."

"Each station has a full squad," Ted said. "And it only takes one Envoy to set up a converter. That leaves five people to train."

"And they already are," Mata said. "The ad hasn't even hit the airwaves, and they're getting walk-ins in some of the stations."

"Yea, well, I've been out twice, already, for breakthroughs," Marcia said, coming into Muriel's office. "It's like people were just waiting for us to come to them, and suddenly it's going crazy."

"Well, I hope it doesn't get too crazy, or we'll have to pull in more recruits," Ted said. "But, I still think it's a good idea, doing these training stations."

"Any idea how many people are being turned away because they can't pass the basic

test?" asked Muriel, as Marcia suddenly blipped back out.

"None, so far," Mata replied. "But it's early, yet. I'll see if I can get a running total up for you. Also a running total of how many take the training." And above and behind her desk was a digital sign that listed the number of new trainees that had completed training, the population, the number of total trained, and the percentage of the population that was trained. Even as they watched, the numbers went up. Slowly, but steadily.

Muriel created a much smaller version for her desk or wall, and right now put it on the coffee table near her recliner. And still the figures rose, sometimes in spurts and sometimes steadily. And sometimes there were pauses, but not often. With fifty states to account for the rise, it wasn't often that there was no activity, and then only briefly. The effect was mesmerizing.

Finally, Muriel pulled her eyes away from the display and asked Ted, "Depressed areas. Is there any way that we can pull them up? I know we can't find jobs for all those people, but is there anything we can do?"

"Hmm. Maybe. Hold on, and let me ask an expert. Chun," he said and sent, "Muriel's just raised a question any you might be the expert to give us the answer."

"You want to know what to do with the poor, to raise their standard of living," she replied, translating in. "This is a very good question, and I'm not sure I have an answer for you. I think the best I can do is tell you what happened in my country. We – well, my squads – helped a few, until it began to get to be too much. Oh, we kept trying, but more people were being trained than we could reach. Then we found out that we didn't have to go to that much trouble."

"People have friends and relatives," she said, "and even acquaintances through work or other organizations, and they were reaching out and not only training but teaching people how to fix their houses and apartments, how to prepare meals, how to make better clothes, all the things the people needed to live. And that accelerated. So, we really didn't do very much, ourselves, in relation to the population. They did it for themselves."

"There's your answer," Ted said. "Most of these people belong to churches, or clubs of one sort or another – organizations, anyway – and they can help each other to raise their standard of living, and show them how the little money they make can go farther, because they aren't having to pay for the necessities of life, like food and clothing and transportation. So, all we need to do is get them off the grid and onto converters, and the rest can be done by their friends. I'm passing that along through the mass mind, so all the stations have the information."

"OK, I hate to bring up an unpleasant subject, but what about reaction to the training stations?" Muriel asked, as Chun smiled and waved, and translated out. "Are we going to get a backlash from someplace? Someone trying to shut them down before we can get a majority trained?"

"Maybe. But all the stations have shields, and they've extended them out to protect those that might be waiting in line," Ted said. "One of the first things I was concerned with when I started setting them up. Oh, and all the stations have at least two trained humans, so that we can start early in the morning and go late at night," he added. "Not everyone is going to be able to come out during the day, because they have jobs that keep them away. We may get a bigger surge after five or six o'clock their local time, as they come off work."

"The stations have been warned, and at least one Envoy is ready to stop and hold anyone that tries anything physical," Mata said. "Sorry, Ted. I should have told you sooner. But when you were setting it up, you were looking at passive defense. Much like here, when you set up Enclave. Muriel took it active, here, so I suggested the same thing to the Envoys of the stations. One Envoy is acting as the greeter, and is constantly watching for any possible violence against the station."

"OH! Now, why didn't I think of that!" Ted said. "And I've been around Muriel long enough to know that it's the way to deal with violence. I must be getting old."

"No," Muriel said. "You ARE old. But that's OK, gramps. Us young'uns will take care of you."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Ted replied, dryly, implying that she'd put him away – permanently. And Mata gulped.

"MURIEL!" Henry bellowed, as he translated in. "What the hell have you done now? I'm getting bulletins from all over the country. Attacks on some sort of training stations. Everything from fire bombs to drive-by shootings. Some of the bulletins are from police agencies, demanding that we shut down the stations on the grounds that they constitute an attractive nuisance."

"Hmm. And have you apprehended the individuals responsible for the attacks?" Muriel asked.

"Of COURSE we have. They were being held in shield restraints until we got there. And all the evidence was readily available," Henry said. "What is that?" he added, glancing at the display. "Hey, that isn't right. Oh, the population is. But the number of trained people should only be about twenty percent. That shows twenty-five percent."

"And now you know why the stations are being attacked," Muriel said. "Somebody doesn't want the number of trained people to increase. In fact, they want the number to decrease, as in killed off. I suggest you back check the perpetrators and see who they're connected with, or who's paying them. Right off hand, I think you'll find that it's businesses like utilities, cars, software, and oil. Maybe a few others."

"What have you done, girl?" he asked.

"Just what you see," Muriel said. "We've set up training stations, and they're being made use of. People are coming out and getting trained. And somebody doesn't like that."

It's taking them off the electric grid, and off of water and sewage. It means that they don't need health-care, because they have it for free. It means that they can let go of the old clunker car that they're paying a fortune for, because now they can translate where-ever they need to go. In short, they're no longer having to spend their lives fruitlessly trying to acquire the necessities of life, when they can get all those for themselves, and it's taking money out of the pockets of the ones that have been trying to keep them beaten down."

"Yea, well it's starting to get out of hand, Muriel," Henry said.

"Henry, we're in a war. It's already been declared, and not by us," Muriel said with some heat. "We've been attacked physically and through the courts, and now someone is trying to take direct action against us. Again. FIND that someone, or someones. People have the RIGHT to the training. You know that. It's part of their makeup. Find the people responsible for the attacks and put them away. Because, if you don't, then when that display hits sixty percent, you may see a revolution in this country. A revolution of people that have had it with being forced to chose between feeding their families and going to work, because they can't afford both food and gas for the car! And have suddenly been set free of all that, and can see a way to strike back."

"Ouch! You really think it will come to that?" he asked.

"Maybe. But not if I can help it," she replied, calming down some. "Henry, we've been putting out fires all over the country for the past four years. And I finally realized that the only way to stop all the attacks was to get the population trained as quickly as possible."

"It's gone wild, Muriel," Mata said. "Those that just got the training are training friends and family, now. They're getting help from Home to monitor and make sure they're doing it right. But they're doing it. Look at the display!" And Mata was right. The numbers were increasing, and close to thirty percent all ready.

"Yes, Henry, I think it could come to that, unless we can step in and halt the process. But I'm afraid it's going to take some work on your part, too. Every time these people stick their heads up, we need to take them out of play," Muriel said. "Legally, if at all possible. And we have to change the government. Oh, not the form. Just the people that are driving it into the ground. Your part is to make arrests, and track back up through the lines of inquiry to the source of the problem, and take them out, too."

"That's more than we can do, Muriel," he said. "We don't have the resources to do that kind of investigation. And we CAN'T pass it off to you."

"Henry, you have our new computers. I know you do. USE them. THEY can do the research and investigation for you, and supply you with hard evidence," Muriel said.

"Oh. I never thought of that. They can really do it?" he asked.

"Give them a loose and open ended request, and ask for hard evidence," Muriel said. "You'll get it."

“OK. I've got to get back, then,” he said, and translated out. Muriel just looked at Ted.

“Hey, I'm just sitting here. YOU'RE the one in charge. And it sounds to me like you're covering all the points. At least all the ones that I can see,” he said.

“Then we have to wait it out. I expect that it's going to go to forty percent by the end of the evening,” Muriel said.

“I think you're being conservative, Muriel,” Mata said. “If it keeps up at this pace, it should be a lot higher than that.

“Maybe. But I don't expect that it will stay at this pace,” Muriel replied. “This afternoon it should drop off, as most of the people that WEREN'T at work will have already been through the process. Then another small surge after six in each local time zone as the ones that were at work stop by for their training.”

“Well, I'm not going to bet against you. I did that once and was thoroughly humiliated by the experience,” Mata said. “But I still think you're wrong on the quantities. The drop off may take place the way you think. But I don't think it'll be as severe as you're expecting. And I don't think you're taking into account the number of people that are getting the training, then going on to train others.”

“Well, I guess we'll see. In the mean time I have some work to do. Alice” Muriel said and sent, “I've got some questions for you, if you're free.”

“I'm not free,” she said, translating in and getting a cup of coffee as she sat down. “I'm paid, and handsomely, for my time. I guess that tells you what kind of a woman I am.” Mata snickered. Ted's outburst was a bit more liquid, and Muriel just grinned.

“OK, here's the scoop. I want to see about ramming some bills through Congress, to straighten out the legal mess that they've created. How can I go about doing it?” she asked.

“You can't. Bills have to be introduced by members of Congress, and then it's a long, slow process through committees and such before it reaches the floor,” Alice replied. “And, if they're the bills I think they are, then trying to challenge the way things are through the Supreme Court would likewise be about as ineffectual. They get to choose what they are going to review.”

“Huh. So, we can't get people together to sponsor a bill. Well, THAT sucks,” Muriel said, and reflexively looked for the bar of soap from her mother. “OK, then we'll just have to create an organization or organizations to press the representatives to do the job, themselves. I'll have to think about how to set that up.”

“Something else that you might not know, Muriel,” Alice said. “Many representatives have signed 'third party' agreements to maintain specific points of view, regardless of the will of their constituents. In some cases, the stance that the representative took has cost him

votes of even his own party members, because they didn't accept that stance. In fact, that behavior was what was behind that splinter group that was driving a political party so badly."

"Is that legal?" asked Muriel. "I mean, basically, they're contracting with the American people to represent them. I would think that the contract with the people would take precedence. Where do they get off letting their personal feelings and attitudes trump the contract they have with the people?"

"Oh, now that's a complex question. Basically it boils down to pressure from various groups coupled with a lack of understanding of what the people in their constituency actually want," Alice said. "If you don't already have the Political Science course from Betty – specifically the one regarding politics in America – then get it and take a look. The people as a whole are not organized, and therefore their voices are often overlooked. Second is the fact that the pressure that the groups put on the politicians may be monetary, ideological, or religious. The constant fights over Rowe versus Wade Supreme Court ruling is an example of that. Religious groups are forever trying to get that overturned, either through Congress or back in the Supreme Court, now that the make-up of the court is different."

"OK, NOW my head aches," Muriel said. "Somebody page Diogenes of Sinope. It's already apparent that there's no honest politicians."

"I wouldn't say there are none," Alice said. "But if there are any, they're few and not well respected in the political community. And they, too, can be swayed into thinking that the people want one thing, when actually they want another. They're usually idealists, and ideals can change depending on who you're talking to."

"Alice," Muriel said with a lopsided grin, "you're really not helping me, here. You're leaving me with an answer I DON'T want to make."

"I know. All I can suggest is to wait until the numbers come in, and see if they suggest anything. Or, maybe someone else can come up with a solution," she said.

"OK. I'll wait. I HATE waiting, but I guess I'll have to do it," Muriel said.

Chapter 29

A Presidential Summons

(Friday morning)

"Mister President. You wanted to see me?" asked Muriel

"Lose the squad," he replied.

"Can't do that, sir. So, say what you have to say, or I'll go back to work," Muriel said.

"Then, you and they will have to be placed under arrest, for the attempted overthrow of the government," he replied.

"Interesting. Considering that I've never EVER considered overthrowing the government of this or any other country," she said.

"Don't lie to me! You've done it twice, already. Once in China and once in Iran. And now you're doing it here!" he hollered.

"Nope. Not even close. We, meaning Home and it's Regiment, eliminated a threat to both us and the United States. The government of China wasn't touched by us or at our direction," Muriel said. "The action taken in China was by Ambassador Chun, yes. But that was in response to the threat that the government posed to the people of China. And as for Iran, they did it to themselves before Ambassador Ameera ever returned to the country."

"That's not what I hear," he said.

"Then you're listening to the wrong people, and ignoring the facts of the case," Muriel responded. "Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

"YOU'RE NOT GOING ANYPLACE!" he screamed. "You're going to jail for treason, young lady! You're still a citizen of the United States of America, and have conspired to take over the country!"

"Mister President, I can only presume that your outlandish and ill advised statements are the result of people being trained in Envoy techniques. And somebody doesn't like that because it causes them to lose money. Doesn't like the fact that the people so trained can't be forced to cough up money for products and services that were substandard at best, and downright lethal at worst," Muriel said. "And as for arresting me, you can try. You'll fail, and look foolish, but you can try. It would also be the last act as President that you took, as I'd see that you were recalled or even impeached, if necessary. Don't threaten me, Mister President. I don't bully worth a damn. Now . . . when you're ready to look at the facts and talk reasonably, let me know." She and the squad and Mata translated out.

"Well?" asked Ted, in her office.

“He wanted to arrest me for treason – for trying to overthrow the government,” Muriel replied, and threw herself into her recliner. “You know, I’ve tried for four years to help him understand that he’s GOT to stop listening to people’s rubbish that isn’t backed with fact. FOUR YEARS! And he pulls this bone-headed stunt.”

“INCOMING MISSILES! Short range. American planes,” Mata said.

“SHIT! That stupid son of a Scramble, people. Put the planes on the ground and destroy the missiles and any ammunition. I want the pilots in my office. I’ll decide what to do with the planes after I’ve talked to them,” Muriel said, and her squads translated out. Fine minutes later a straggling line of very tired and overheated pilots made it’s way into her office, and her squads returned to what they were doing.

“Gentlemen. And lady. Sorry, I almost missed seeing you, there. Someone get them water or coffee or pop, whatever non-alcoholic drink they want. And get them chairs,” Muriel said. After a minute, the group was seated and was beginning to cool down with their drinks.

“Welcome to the Envoy Enclave Embassy of Home. The place you tried to eliminate,” Muriel said, tiredly. “Now, we can do this the easy way, or the hard way. The hard way is I just ask you questions and you respond honestly. And we’ll start with that, because you won’t like the easy way. The easy way is that I simply cause your mind to only tell the truth. And, you being military and officers, there’s a chance that you could inadvertently divulge classified material that way. And I really don’t want to hear it. So please, pick the hard way.”

“Who are you?” one of them asked.

“My name is Muriel. And I’m in charge, here. I’d like to know who gave the orders to fire on a friendly nation’s Embassy. Really, that’s all I want to know. Then you and your aircraft can be returned to your unit, and we won’t ever have to see each other again, unless YOU wish to,” Muriel said.

“Ma’am, under the Geneva Convention”

“Don’t bother,” she interrupted. “We’re not signatories to it. Or to the United Nations. Or to any other government over-site of ANY earthly government. So, the statement you were about to make of ‘name, rank, and serial number’ is meaningless here. One way or another I will find out who, ultimately, gave the order. I already have a hunch who it was. You’d just be confirming it. Hello, Fran. Whatcha need?”

“Other way around. You’ll need a monitor, and you were going to ask Mata. But this is something that’s best left to American citizens. Beside,” she said, “I’m a doctor.”

“Yea, there is that. OK, Major,” Muriel said, turning back to him. “Here’s how the easy way works. And the reason there’s a doctor handy to monitor. What I’ll have to do is create a one-way link to your mind. Well, create is a bit mild. I’ll have to force it, and that can cause some pain. Fran is a doctor, and sensitive to pain, and can supply the power – sorry, energy

– and monitor blood pressure and blood sugar, and esoteric things like that that a poor mortal girl like me would never understand, and sooth away the pain almost before you get it. Now, as to the forced link, the whole purpose is just to 'throw the switch', so to speak, so that you can only tell the truth. Once I get where you got your orders, I'll reverse it back to where it was, and you'll be back to normal. Oh, you'll probably hate yourself for giving up the information, but really there's no reason for you to."

"Um," he said. "Is this really necessary?"

"No. If you just tell me – and by the way, I CAN tell when someone is lying – then I wouldn't have to force it out of you," Muriel said. "I take it that you don't like the idea of someone monkeying around with your mind?"

"Yea, you could say that. All right. I was given the orders by General Murdock, who got his from the President," the major said.

"Did you see the orders from the President?" asked Muriel.

"No, of course not. Majors don't question Generals," he replied. "Are you really a doctor?" he asked Fran.

"Yes," Fran replied. "Envoy style medicine. And don't let that goof on my right fake you out. She's got more degrees than I have."

"Oh? Is she someone special?" he asked.

"Naw, just the Ambassador to earth and the Leader of Home. Oh, and my friend, of course," Fran said, grinning.

"Oh, SH . . . SHOOT! Sorry. Ma'am, can I ask asylum for myself and my team?" he asked.

"You can, and have. May I ask why?" asked Muriel.

"Because I think I've just been dropped in it, so to speak. It's bad enough that I was tasked with making war on a friendly nation, but when it also involves American citizens, well, I'm not sure anyone outside here would treat us honestly right now," he said.

"You may have a point, Major. Alright. As long as you stay inside Enclave, you're in sanctuary. Step out, and we can't help you. The same goes for the other pilots. None of you will be held as prisoners. You're free to do as you like, and go where you like," Muriel said. "But asylum only works if you're in here. So, consider your options carefully. We can protect you, here, if you hadn't already gotten the point from your failed mission. Oh, and you're here as our guests, so nothing you need or want will cost you anything. It's our obligation and our pleasure to provide it. Mata?"

"On it. They're checked in, and Envoys from Guest House are coming to escort them

around, and take them to their rooms. Oh, when I say 'escort you around' I mean just that. They're not your guards. They're more like tour guides," Mata said. "You'll need clothes, and they know where the clothing stores are. They also know the restaurants, and can suit your likes to what we have available, including the restaurant in Guest House. They're also your servants in Guest House, and can help you enjoy your stay here." As she spoke the last, a group of Envoys entered, in pairs, and went to the pilots, smiling and introducing themselves and asking what each of them would like to do first.

As the group filed out, Muriel moved to her desk and looked at Mata. "Murdock," Mata said, "Hubert Morris, General, USAF. Currently stationed at Luke Air Force Base. Here's what he looks like," she added, sending an image to Muriel.

Muriel took the image and concentrated, then a grim smile crossed her face, and the General faced her, across her desk. "General, you sent some people to kill me. Maybe all of Enclave, which would have meant also killing innocent civilians that are just visiting, as well as other American citizens. I want to know why, and who gave you the orders. Now, I'm not going to offer you the hard way of giving me the information, because I really don't think you'd give it to me, willingly," she added, and went into his mind and pegged the dial on 'truth'.

And he talked. As Muriel had suspected, the orders hadn't come from the President, but from the head of a company. Well, technically, a president, but that was beside the point. Muriel recognized the name as one of the ones that had been pestering the President of the United States, and immediately sent the information to Melanie. She then let the General ramble on until he ran down, then unlocked the dial, and translated him to a cell in the warehouse prison. When he was safely tucked away, Muriel went back to her office, and found Melanie there.

"Girl, what did you just dump on me?" Melanie said.

"We were attacked by a flight of Air Force jets, firing missiles at Enclave. The planes are safe and on our back lot. They've been stripped of missiles and ammunition, but otherwise unharmed," Muriel said. "The pilots are under asylum rules until I can be sure that they will be treated fairly. They were ordered to attack us by General Murdock, who supposedly got his orders from the President. That was a lie, of sorts. Murdock never specified WHAT president it was that gave him the orders. The reality was that he was given the orders by the president of one of the companies that's been badgering the President, which caused that row this morning. You need to tell him that elements of the Military are taking orders from civilians, and not from their formal chain of command."

"WHAT? You're saying that the General acted without orders? Simply because a civilian told him to do it?" Melanie demanded.

"Yep. That's exactly what I'm saying," Muriel replied. Oh, and this might interest you," she added, pointing to the display on her desk.

"Sixty percent? Are you saying that sixty percent of the population is now trained?" Melanie asked.

"Yep. There are enough people to start a recall referendum on every Congressman, and successfully pass it," Muriel said. "You might mention that to the President. I think it would calm down a number of members of Congress to realize that they could be put out of office very quickly. By the people that they are SUPPOSED to be serving. Oh, and the percentage is still rising."

"Is this a threat?" asked Melanie.

"Not even close. It's a reality. I'm not suggesting it to anyone. And I won't. I'm just noting that there are enough people in America with enough intelligence to see how things work and at least enough sense to pound sand down a rat hole," Muriel said.

"Girl, you're scaring me,"

"I know. It scares me, too," Muriel said. "A lot of these people are the very ones that were hurt the worst in the recession. Some of them are former members of the Armed Forces that have been living on the streets because they couldn't find work, and couldn't afford a place to stay. Well, they've got one, now. SOME of them are middle class people that were reduced to poverty level. Think about it. I don't NEED to suggest anything to them. They're fed up. And now, they've got the ability to strike back. And, if they don't realize it now, they soon will, that there are a LOT of them out there with the training. In some cases, whole families. I lost a bet with Mata last night. And here, it's jumped even higher, and it's only noon."

"What you're saying is that there could be a quiet revolution in America," Melanie said.

"That's the way it looks. Now, that's the potential. I haven't seen any indicators, yet, that it's actually going to happen," Muriel said. "But it's one of the consequences of having so many trained people. People are getting fed up with not being represented. And that's the way the original revolution started. Lack of representation in government is also the way dictatorships start."

"Are you saying that we have a dictatorship?" asked Melanie.

"Don't we? Who's actually calling the shots?" Muriel countered. "By the way, many of these trained people were trained in the wild. They were trained by people that had gone to the stations and gotten the training, then turned around and trained family and friends. In other words, I have no way of knowing if they've faced the Judgment – no way of knowing if they're in touch with their balance."

"Oh, joy. OK, I'm going to have to tell the President that he's got a majority of the population that could pose a threat to the status quo. NOT to the government, directly, though a lot of politicians could be voted out, or even recalled," Melanie said.

"Tell him, rather, that the balance of power just shifted away from the businesses. He, and the politicians in Congress, are going to have to face the People. And yes, I capitalized

'People'," Muriel said. "Just the ex-military that were on the streets constitutes a threat to their jobs, if their needs aren't met. Same with those living at or even below poverty level. The richest country in the world, and a good portion of it is held in virtual slavery – forced to accept jobs far below their education level because of the manipulations of businesses in politics."

"Ouch. OK, NOW I see the shape of the problem. Is there ANY way you can control them?" Melanie asked.

"Nope. They're on their own. I wouldn't even try to control them. That's not my job. I'm NOT a ruler, no matter what people think 'Leader' means," Muriel said. Melanie looked at Muriel, strangely, as if she'd never seen her before, then translated out.

Chapter 30

A Presidential Pardon (Friday afternoon)

"Sixty percent, Muriel," Mata said, grinning at her.

"All right. Don't rub it in. You won the bet," Muriel replied.

"I wish. I didn't bet, remember? So you're off the hook," Mata countered.

"Except that you're going to keep reminding me of it," Muriel said. "Instead, why don't you help me figure out how I can get the President to understand that I'm NOT the bad guy. That he's getting bad information from those that would try to use him."

"You gave Melanie the disk showing that the General acted on orders from a civilian president of a company, didn't you?" Mata asked.

"Of course I did. Do you really think that that's going to sway him?" Muriel asked. "He's being beaten up by company presidents and CEOs that tell him it's all our fault, and we need to be eliminated. I would have thought that my translating out of his office would have reminded him that we CAN'T be arrested or held against our will."

"OK, the only other thing I can suggest is that you tell him about evolution," Mata said. "Humans are the evolution of Envoys. But more importantly, right at this time, Envoys are the evolution of Humans. We're the immediate reason that humans are able to do amazing things, in light of the past development. And you will do more. And as you do, YOU teach US, and aid in our development."

"He'll never buy it. Too esoteric," Muriel said.

"Then turn him over to someone else to talk to," Mata responded. "You DON'T have to take the heat for his not being able to think. Give him to Bobby or Tommy. Just make sure they realize why you're doing it."

"Hmm. Actually, they'd classify as being of equivalent rank as the President. You're right. Maybe I SHOULD pass off. Or, if he wants someone that's definitely country level, maybe Chun would help out," Muriel mused.

"Or Anna," Mata said with a grin.

"Oh, GAD! I can just see that!" Muriel exclaimed. "She'd have him so twisted into pretzel shapes that he'd NEVER get his head clear. Just having to deal with a twelve year old, again, would warp him," she added. Then seemed to stop and think about it for a minute. "You know, Mata, you may have something there. But it would be late at night for her."

"Well, you could always ask Taylor," Mata said.

"No," Muriel replied. "No, he's not mature enough to realize the ramifications of taking on the President of the United States. Not yet. I have hope for him, but until he can stand up for himself against the rumor mongers in Britain . . . just . . . no. Mata, I haven't pushed him in his development. He is good at working with the general public, but he has a problem working with politics. His usual method is to rely on his grandmother, the Queen. It's all right as far as it goes, but it doesn't go far enough. So, now I'm trying to push him into actually dealing with the politicians and getting them to understand what is and what isn't a part of what they should be doing. Those rumors about him? They came from one or more of the politicians that see him as easily swayed – used, if you will – to presenting only their point of view."

"Oh."

"Yea. That's why it looks like I'm playing hot and cold with him. He has to develop his own way of dealing with politics," Muriel said. "Anna did it right off the bat, laying it on the line that she wouldn't be buffaloeed by Sergei. But she also connected deep, and she had me as a model to begin with. He isn't connected that deep, and he's still using the model that he grew up with." Just then, Melanie translated in.

"Muriel," Melanie said, "the President wants to see you, again."

"Uh, huh. THIS time, he comes here," Muriel said. "He knows how to translate, or you can bring him, and guarantee that he'll be able to leave whenever he wants. But HE comes to ME this time. Go tell him."

"Aren't you able to contact him?" she asked.

"Oh, sure. If I want to. But there's two things. First, all our communication has been going through you. Second, I'm not accepting from him, for the time being, until he realizes that he's dealing with someone ABOVE his station. He comes to me from now on. Not me going to him. It's to reinforce that he may be the leader of a country, but I'm the leader of a world. There will be no more attempts to arrest me for doing my job," Muriel said, dismissively.

"He's not going to like that," Melanie said.

"Good. Then maybe he'll learn something from it. Melanie," Muriel added, "I've been nice to him. Too nice. I've been going to him like a dog to heel. This last time he discovered that not only did the dog have teeth, it wasn't even a dog. He comes to me."

"Ouch! OK, I'll tell him. I'll let you know what happens," Melanie said, and translated out.

"Oh, my. Looks like a LOT of people are about to get an education," Mata said. "You know he's going to blow his top."

"Yep. And expect that, since I've blocked connection to him, either you or Ted is going to get a very nasty send from him," Muriel said. "Be sure to let me know what he says – just before I translate him in and read him the riot act."

"Oh, shit," Mata said. "You really ARE pissed off."

"Yep," Muriel said, then watched as Mata's eyes almost crossed as she obviously got the send from the President. "He's pissed, huh?" she asked. Mata just nodded. Muriel smiled a grim sort of smile, and translated him to her office.

"Mister President, you do NOT abuse my people. Is that understood?" asked Muriel, quietly.

"Now you look here, young lady!" he started.

"Nope. YOU . . . look here," and she translated him to Home, going with him. The effect was immediate. He collapsed to his knees and began screaming.

"Hi, Sergeant Carter," Muriel said, ignoring the President's performance. "Oh, don't mind him. He hasn't been in touch with his balance for a while, and just needs a bit of an attitude readjustment. And this is just the tool for it."

"I see. And I thought he was doing so well," Carter said, sadly.

"He was. But he fell in with some bad company," she replied. "This shouldn't take long. Then we'll get out of your way."

"Oh, don't hurry on my account. Things are running smoothly, here," the Sergeant said. "Besides, I don't get to see enough of you. Loved that 'dinner date' of yours. I haven't laughed that hard in years. But what are you going to do with that boy?"

"I don't know yet," Muriel replied, "beyond getting him to grow up and stand on his own two feet, that is. I know what you're thinking, Carter. And maybe it'll happen, and maybe it won't. WAY too soon to tell. First, he has to know that he's himself and not a pale copy of his grandmother. Or any other person."

"Well, you'll do that. You did it with Jeff," he said. "Just after you made him president of all those companies, he happened to come up here, talking with the engineering section. Seemed a bit cocky. No, I didn't do or say anything, beyond congratulating him on his new position in life. Didn't need to. The next time he came up he was much different. More sure of himself and less running on ego and nerve. More relaxed and self confident."

"Yea, and now he's got a girlfriend," Muriel said.

"Dad! Are you telling tales out of school, again?" asked Melanie, translating in.

"What? . . . Who? . . . ME? . . . Never!" he sputtered. "Besides, it was something that Muriel did, not me!"

"Uh, huh. And you, Muriel White. Was this really necessary?" Melanie asked.

"Yep. But I think it's gone on long enough." Muriel walked over to the President, squatted down, and placed her elbows on her knees to be at eye level with the man. "All right. You've had your wallow in self-pity. Now, it's time to act like a man and do something about it. You know what the balance is, and how to find it. If you don't, then ask Melanie, and she'll teach you. I don't have time to constantly deal with your childish tantrums. So, go on, get out of here and start doing YOUR job. Melanie," she said, standing up, "Take him back, and see to it that he uses the balance."

"Muriel . . .," the President began.

"Not a word. You know I don't accept apologies. Only actions. Only behavior. Go on," she added, gently. "Get out of here and let me get back to work." He left. Whether he did it himself or Melanie translated him, at least he was gone.

"Yep," Carter said. "I can see that you learned from Caleb, all right," and he laughed. "Slickest job of pulling someone back and ripping them apart as I've ever seen. And left him WANTING to change. You'll do, girl. You really will." Muriel gave him a lopsided grin, then translated back to her office.

"So, how bad was it?" asked Mata.

"He's still alive. But now he knows what he did wrong. Melanie's got him. She'll teach him to USE his balance, then I bet there'll be a difference in him. Less waffling," Muriel said.

"Well, on the Home front, we're now up to seventy percent. We won't get them all, you know," Mata said.

"I know. But if we aren't at the tipping point, we're close to it," Muriel replied. "Now, if they just get together and demand some changes, it would help."

"You're not going to broadcast to them – make suggestions?" asked Mata.

"Nope. They're American citizens. They've got to make their own decisions," Muriel said. "If I lead them, then the whole thing could be compromised. They'd say that the training was a way of forcing them to do what I wanted."

"Oh. You really think . . . ?" Mata started.

"Yep. All the time," Muriel said with a grin. "OH! You mean do I think someone would try to say that I forced them to take a particular action? Definitely. We've got too many corporations out after my scalp. They want to see me, and ALL the trained humans under some sort of control that would keep them from interfering with the money the corporations

have been raking in. And the current training just accelerates it.”

“Well, the incidence of violence around the training stations is picking up,” Mata said. “We’re getting reports of firebombing. Envoys are holding the perpetrators for the police, but in many cases the police are not showing up, or they’re letting them go as soon as they’re out of sight of the training stations.”

“Have the Envoys from Home track the police, and hold them along with the perpetrators, and call out the Feds. The ones where the police refuse to come pick them up, have the Envoys translate them to the Warehouse Prison,” Muriel said. “And is the violence being contained?”

“You bet. And you’ll never guess who’s containing it,” Mata said.

“Previous trainees are staying, and throwing shields over anyone that tries anything. Others are stacking shields around the training stations,” Muriel said.

“Previous trainees WAIT A MINUTE! How’d you know!” Mata exclaimed, even if it technically was a question.

“Good guess,” Muriel said, grinning. “Aided by the fact that you leak when you’re excited.”

“GRRR!”

“Don’t growl at me. I’m just taking after my trainer,” Muriel laughed.

“Well, heads up. You’ve got company coming,” Mata said. And the President translated in, along with Melanie.

“Mister President,” Muriel said in a neutral voice. “I hope this isn’t going to go the way of the previous two meetings.” She moved to her recliner.

“No. No, and I know you won’t accept it, but I AM sorry,” he said. “Muriel, what can be done about the violence?”

“It’s being contained,” she said. “Unfortunately, either the police aren’t coming out, or they’re letting the perpetrators go as soon as they’re out of site. Mata and I were just discussing that. So, we’re holding both the police and the perpetrators as soon as the police try to let them go and calling in the FBI to take charge. As for the ones that the police won’t even pick up, we’re bringing them here.”

“Don’t. Send for the FBI for them, too,” he said. “That way it won’t look like you had any part of it.”

“Gotcha. Mata”

“On it. Henry's boys are taking care of it,” Mata said. “They should be rounded up, shortly.”

“Good,” the President said. “When I got back to Washington a delegation of businesses and utilities were there demanding that I do something about the training stations. I told them that it wasn't my function, and they threatened to do something, themselves.”

“Did you hold them?” asked Muriel.

“No. But some of the Secret Service are bringing them in,” he replied. “Since they made the threats, they set themselves up as suspects, even if they didn't do it themselves. And I'll have Melanie tell the FBI to question the ones that they bring in. One tie-back, and I'll order the companies shut down. Think you can cover utilities?”

“It'll be a scramble, but we'll manage,” she replied. “Oh, and it looks like you finally got the point. I'll take your actions as your apology. This time. But I've gotten awfully tired of having to re-explain to you why you can't arrest me. So I hope this is the last time.”

“I know. So do I. Melanie said she'd help me,” he said. “I think I'd prefer you as a friend. As an enemy, you tend to go for the throat.”

“That's because I was seriously tired of being bullied, four years ago. I started striking back, then” she said. “It's become a habit.”

“Well, I'll get out of here, and monitor what's going on with FBI and Secret Service,” he said, and he and Melanie translated out.

Chapter 31

A Change of Attitude

(Saturday morning)

Breaking News! This just in. Businesses across the country have asked the Federal government for assistance. Utility companies supplying water, gas, electricity and sewage disposal have just had a rash of cancellations of their services. Oil companies have suddenly noticed a sudden drop in the use of gasoline. Phone and Internet providers have lost customers at an alarming rate. The combined companies are blaming the Envoy Enclave and the alleged Leader of Home for their loss, and demand that they make up those losses. It is their claim that the Envoy Enclave and it's Leader have somehow convinced these people that they no longer need these products and services, despite all reason and logic.

"Well, now," Muriel said. "Isn't that interesting. I wonder what else we'll hear."

We take you now to Margo, who has been trying to get information from the government concerning reports of drive-by shootings and fire-bombings of Envoy Training Stations all across the country. Margo?

Thanks, Stan. I've just gotten out of a meeting between the President and the heads of those companies. It appears that there were no suspects in the early violence against the Training Stations. However, later attempts were thwarted by ordinary citizens, who held the perpetrators until the police could arrive. It also appears that in some instances no police presence was forthcoming until the FBI was called in. In others, suspects were released by police officers out of view of the stations, but were unable to get away. Again, the FBI or Secret Service picked up both the suspects and the police that had tried to let them go. Reports coming in link all the suspects to one or more of the companies that are complaining about the Envoy Enclave and it's Leader. Back to you, Stan.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Muriel said, laughing. "Now, I wonder where all that information came from?"

"Me," Melanie said, translating in. "I'm the guilty party. And if you EVERY tell anyone that I pulled your trick on the suspects . . . Well, you'd just better not, that's all I've got to say."

"Me? I know nothing!" Muriel said, unconvincingly. Perhaps it was the giggle at the end. "So, you pegged minds to truth, huh?"

"Yea. To quote the President, 'Melanie, I want you to question those people, and I don't care how you do it. Just don't leave any marks or witnesses'. So, I'd throw the switch while walking into the interrogation room, and throw it back as I left. The rest was recorded, of course."

"So, now what?" asked Muriel.

"We roll them up. The companies will be shut down. That's why I'm here," Melanie

said. "Can you cover for all the utilities and such?"

"Yea, but not for gas," Muriel replied. "And there's a lot of people out there that still run cars with internal combustion engines."

"OK, we'll have to see what we can do for them," Melanie said. "But, if you can get converters in place, it'll help."

"They'd have to be region wide. We'd never have time or manpower to get individual ones in place. Oh, afterward, and rotating crews into areas we can, but it'll take time to do that," Muriel said. "However, it may not take as much as you think. The number of trained people is up to seventy percent."

"Seventy-five," Mata said, "and it's starting to level off. I don't think we'll get many more. And try to give us some warning, so we can have the converters in place when you cut off the utilities."

"Then start now," Melanie said. "It's going down in an hour. I'll see you later when I have more information." And she translated out.

"How about it, Mata," asked Muriel.

"No Sweat," she replied. "We know where all the grid connections are, and can have a converter in place, there, in minutes. Crews are already translating out of home to do just that. The switchover will be cleaner than standard switching from network power to generator. And we've got people talking to the hospitals and other critical sites about going on converters instead of being hooked up to the utilities."

"OK, what do I need to do in this?" asked Muriel.

"Nothing. Oh, we're covering water, too. And we can even cover natural gas," Mata said. "It took the bright boys of Home about five minutes to figure it out. Sewage is no problem, since that's just a deconstruction coupled with a water converter to put water back into the rivers and aquifers. The thing is, if any of those businesses want to get going again, they'll be out of luck once the switch takes place."

"OUCH! So, the shutdown will be permanent?" asked Muriel.

"Yep. They had their chance and blew it. Ted's already got the request to have them delisted in to the Securities and Exchange Commission. Not that it would make much difference, since the stock will tank as soon as they are shut down. Only the die-hards will hang onto stock in a company that's been raided and closed, with no prospects of being reopened," Mata said. "And Ted is getting that out to the news media, as soon as the take-down takes place."

"So, I sit and twiddle my thumbs and watch the figures roll up?" asked Muriel.

“Or, you can see this group of people that are wandering in this direction,” Mata said, with a grin.

“What people? Oh, them. Well, at least they don't look like angry businessmen,” Muriel said, and went through the doors to meet them. “Hello. Can I help you?”

“Miss, we're looking for the Ambassador. I'd say we were concerned citizens, but that title has been overused, lately, and by the wrong people. People that had absolutely NO concern for the average citizen,” the leader said.

“OK, well I think I can probably help you. Give me a second to get things set up, and we can translate back to the training room in the Guest House,” Muriel said, and sent to the manager a request for chairs for fifty, and one for her, as well as refreshments and such. “OK, Guest House should be set up in a minute. I'll translate you to the front desk area, where it's cooler, and we can walk in as soon as it's set up.”

“Not to be a bother, miss, but we wanted to see the Ambassador,” the leader said.

“Oh. Sorry. My name is Muriel,” she said, producing her passport, “and I'm the Ambassador to earth and the Leader of Home. Will I do? Or was there a different Ambassador you wanted to see?”

“GEEZ! Carl. Can you put your foot in your mouth any further,” asked a man next to him. And the crowd chuckled.

“Carl? Is that your name?” she asked. At his nod, she went on, “You really didn't put your foot in it, Carl. There's lot's of people that don't know who I am. And I do look kinda young for the job. Well, I used to be younger, and had the job even then, so you can imagine the confusion some people had about me. Let's get where it's cooler,” she added, and translated the group to the front desk.

“Muriel! Thanks for the warning,” the manager said, coming toward her and smiling. “We've got some extra Envoys coming in from Home to help out, so everyone will have personal service. Why don't you go on in. Seats are in place, and we dropped the temperature a couple of degrees to help them cool down. We'll bring it back up to normal, slowly, so as not to shock them. Oh, and there's desks attached to the chairs, and tablets and water available. We should have the Envoys in place in about ten minutes if anyone wants anything else.”

“Oh, thanks. I see you're trying hard to even out-do yourself,” Muriel said with a grin.

“Oh, well . . . for you, Muriel, I try to do more than is expected of me. And now you're making me blush,” the manager said.

“Not possible,” Muriel said. “No blood supply to cause the blush.”

“No, but I can fake it,” he replied, grinning.

“YOU GOOF!” Muriel exclaimed.

“FINALLY!” he laughed. “After all these years, I finally get to banter with the boss!” And after they both laughed about it, he added, “Go on in.”

And they did. Seats were set up in a double semi-circle, with one seat at the center-point of the arc. All were equipped with desk arms, water, electronic tablet – courtesy of Jeff – and all were semi-recliners, like theater seats but with a leg rest. The row behind was raised and offset between chairs in the front row to allow an easy view of Muriel.

“Grab seats, everyone, and we can get started,” Muriel said. As they moved to available seats, Muriel added, “I see I mis-counted, but the manager didn't. There's fifty-one of you. Any particular reason why?”

“Well, actually, yes,” said Carl. “We represent the trained people of the fifty states and the District of Columbia. Basically, we want to know what we can do to help out, and how we can do it.” As they sat down, a sign appeared on the front of the desk area with their name and the name of the state they represented. Carl took a chair forward of the two arcs, and ‘Washington, D. C.’ appeared under his name.

“Good question!” Muriel responded. “Well, to start off with, you aren't government or police. So, don't try to fill those functions. However, there is a great deal you can do, depending on how many people you have in the state, and how busy you want to be. Oh, and a record of this meeting will be given to each of you, when we're done, so that you can go over it with others and figure out what you want to and can do.”

“Oh, GREAT!” Carl said. “My ability to take notes borders on nonexistent. And with these tablets, I wouldn't know what to do.” As he said that, Envoys appeared by each of the men and women.

“Well, for that, I'll have to turn you over to one of my friends,” Muriel said. “But for the time being, you won't need them. But do take them with you. You were all shown how to make ‘no pockets’, weren't you?” asked Muriel.

“Oh, yes. The Ambassadors at each of the training stations made sure that each of us had ALL the basics, plus some additional material that's come up since your original training,” Carl said. “And I made sure that each of the people here were covered to that extent. I think that's why they named me as the leader of this mob.” And the crowd chuckled.

“So, when you leave, just tuck them in a ‘no pocket’. I'd teach you, but this is the first one that I've seen,” Muriel said. “So, I'll be learning right along with you. That's for later. For now, just pick it up and look at it and say, ‘hello’. That'll activate it to you, if it's anything like Jeff's phones.” They did, and were startled at the response from the tablets. They flashed twice, and suddenly showed Muriel's face.

“OK, what can you do. Mostly, administrative stuff,” Muriel said. “First and most

important is to check on those that don't have the training, to be sure that they've got utilities and such. Poorer neighborhoods, maybe check that they've got food and clothing, too. And medical. If you run into medical problems, holler help to Home, and an Envoy will come out and take care of them. You all should have had the 'battlefield first aid' course, so you should be able to keep people alive until an Envoy doctor can get to you. OK?"

"OK," Carl replied. "But what if they don't want the help of trained people?"

"Then they're on their own," Muriel said. "We can't force them to accept us or what we can do to help any more than we can force people to be trained. We can offer. They have the right to refuse. Some will for religious reasons. I'm sure you've seen that. And some will because their balance isn't right, and they're angry. Those are the people most apt to be violent. Keep your shields up."

"Criminal activities," she went on. "Unless you or individuals in your state are members of a police force, you and the rest of you can't arrest people. You can't hold them, unless they present a continuing threat to other people. BUT . . . you can track them, or ask Home for help tracking them for the regular police. Fires, don't get in the way of the regular fire departments. But you can help, by making sure the structure is vacant, and by snuffing the fire. You don't have to be IN the structure to translate people and pets out."

"Government. You can't take over without being voted into office," she said. "But those of your people that are in government can try to sway legislation. And those that aren't in government can try to encourage your representatives to only pass legislation that actually helps everyone. Search and rescue. For lost people you, as volunteers, can be invaluable. But make sure that you coordinate with the authorities. Hostage rescue and the like, where it might be dangerous, contact Marcia. She and her troops are trained for it. Marcia, got a moment?"

"Hey, boss. What's up?" Marcia asked as she translated in. And with her came Jeff.

"I wanted these people to meet you, in case there's a Hostage rescue situation in their states," Muriel said.

"OK. This still needs to go through the proper channels – police and government. But if you get their OK, then just let me know, and I'll have my six friends in to see what the situation is and how to handle it."

"Ask your tablets, mentally, to make a record of Marcia, so you'll have a fresh image to project to," Jeff interrupted. "I'll go over the rest with you when Muriel's done. Oh, I'm Jeff, and I invented the tablets. They're actually full fledged computers. More on that, later." And he backed off a bit. Fifty-one people looked at their tablets, and fifty-one images of Marcia looked back at them. Then the screens went back to Muriel's face.

"In case you're wondering why they look so young, these are friends of mine that came with me when I was first getting trained. In fact, I started training them before I'd even completed my own training," Muriel said. "And they're the same age I am. However, in

Marcia's case, she and her troops are certified by the FBI, Secret Service and Navy Seals as being able to do their job. Jeff, on the other hand, simply went out and got a handful of PhDs and decided to become an inventor. He's invented cars, computers, phones, and now tablets, and heads the companies that make them. Any other questions?"

"Yes," Carl said. "What are the chances that Home will take over running the country?"

"That would be up to the people. For the present time, I'd suggest that it NOT happen. It's not something that I'm looking forward to," Muriel replied. "There's a lot still to clean up in the country and in the world. And that really needs to be taken care of before such a decision is even voiced, much less raised, seriously. There are lots of reasons to remain a sovereign country. Not the least of which is to retain your culture and voice in the world."

"Can we be considered Ambassadors?" another person asked.

"Mmm," Muriel paused to think. "Not at the present time. Let's let things shake down a bit more before that question is raised. In fact, IF it's going to happen, you probably will be the LAST to know. I'll keep an eye on how things are going, and provide help where I can. As I see how you work out, I'll see about raising your status. But I think you'll find that, if and when I do, it really won't make a difference in how you do your jobs. Oh and, if it's going to happen, it'll happen to everyone filling a state leadership position at the same time."

"One other thing," Muriel went on, "education. You heard me talk about Jeff's PhDs. There are courses available to you, free. They take about five minutes to dump into you, and, depending on how deep your connection is to your soul, open in anywhere from immediately to a couple of days. Now . . . I'm going to turn this over to Jeff to tell you about the tablets, while I see what arrangements can be made for lunch." And she turned the chair over to Jeff.

Chapter 32

Results

(Saturday afternoon)

"Muriel," Carl said as he came back from lunch, "is there some reason why you won't make us Ambassadors?"

"As a matter of fact, there is," she said. "I've got a bunch of auxiliary Ambassadors, now, that would like to move up. And I'm still undecided with them. They're the ones that manned the training stations, since we weren't allowed to use unsupervised Envoys. Besides which, I'd much rather see you people in government, taking on the task of straightening the country out. It doesn't take away from your being trained, and it DOES give you goals to meet. Most of Ambassador stuff is simply waiting around for something to happen."

"Oh. I never realized that," he said.

"And, to go along with that, if you were taking money from Home as a salary, you'd be ineligible for public office," she added.

"Good point. OK, I just thought I'd ask," he said. "I thought it was something you had against us."

"Nope. Not at all. And it's good that you asked and didn't just assume," she said. "I won't say that I won't ever use you people in one way or another. In fact, a good part of that will be in keeping my troops informed of what's going on, and what problems you might have."

"Yea, we can do that. These are good people, Muriel. I'd never met them before this all went down," Carl said. "But these are the people that stepped up and tried to make a difference in their neighborhoods, then branched out from there. And they really are concerned with what's going on, right now."

"Understandable," Muriel said with a smile. "This whole training thing came about because I was getting hammered from all sides about 'destroying industries' and 'not doing things in the traditional way'. After a while, that got old. Oh, by the way, this is going on in every country that has an Ambassador to it. Even Russia. China, no. They already went through this. And Iran was pretty much switched over already, though they're using training stations to try to get as many of the remainder as they can."

"How do you keep it all straight?" he asked.

"Most of what I do I pass to my soul, and it's stored there. The advantages of having a deep link," she said. "Same way I managed to get fourteen PhDs in four years. When I needed something, to understand what was going on at the time, I grabbed another course from Betty. Oh, she's the Envoy head of my Education squad. Despite what it says on the window to my office, SHE'S the actual brains of the University of Home. I'll be introducing you

all to her, shortly.”

“OK, well, I'll get back to my seat, then,” he said, and walked away.

“All right, people, it's time to try to get you up to speed with education to go with what you've chosen to do. First, the people next to you are Envoys, if you hadn't noticed. They're the ones that have been getting you drinks and snacks, and that showed you where to go for lunch. You'll notice that you didn't have to pay for anything. That's normal. Trainees don't pay. Same perks that I get,” Muriel said, and heard a murmur of appreciation, and a number of people straightened up. Including Carl. “That's inside ANY Enclave. Trainees are honored, like guests. Sorry I didn't make that plain, before.”

“Now,” she went on, “the first thing I'd like you to do is to make sure you are connected deeply enough to pass the courses we'll be giving you straight to your souls. The Envoys will help you. After all, as you now know, they ARE soul. In the mean time, I'll call Betty to help me figure out what would be good for you to have.”

Betty came in at Muriel's call, grinning like a cat. It was decided to give them administrative and management courses, but hold off on accounting unless it was requested. In addition, they would get law and political science. Unlike Muriel, they'd be getting local and state law as well as Federal. Then Muriel asked about diplomacy, and Betty broke off to feed the packages they'd agreed on to the support Envoys, who would pass them on to the crowd.

“I'm not sure that diplomacy is needed in this case, Muriel,” Betty said. “They're not working on an international level.”

“Isn't there a version that just generalized diplomacy?” asked Muriel. “I mean, something that would help them understand how to deal with other people? And politicians?” And Betty snickered at Muriel's separation of politicians from 'other people'.

“Well, I might be able to come up with something,” Betty said, “but it would probably take me a day or two.”

“Hmm. I'm not sure we can hold them here that long,” Muriel said. “I'd like to. They've got to be running on pure nerve to be trying to tackle this so soon after training.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” Betty said. “Even before she'd completed training she'd decked the head of the CIA and had a bunch of bullies arrested. Oh, to say nothing of being shot at.”

“That was pure desperation and rage, Betty. NOT the same thing. These people,” Muriel said, motioning to the crowd, “may have some of the rage, but they're already looking outside themselves. Anna's more the way I was, with her putting down that policeman so handily. OK, why don't we let that wait, and simply let them know that you're working on such a course. OH! And the brochures, so they know what courses are available, in addition to the ones that we're giving them today.”

At that point, the Envoys with the crowd indicated that their charges were finished, and educated. “Ladies and gentlemen,” Betty said, “your Envoys will be handing you your diplomas to indicate your level of education. Not knowing what levels of education all of you had to begin with, you may find that you’ve got a better understanding of the basic middle school and high school courses than you had before. Just a little added bonus, to allow you to fully understand the courses we’ve dumped on you.”

“In addition,” Muriel cut in, “you’re welcome to stay in Enclave – free, of course – and welcome to come back any time under the same conditions. If you decide to stay, just let the Envoys at the front desk know, and they’ll be happy to get you rooms. Is there anything else we can do for you?”

“I have a question,” One of them said. “We saw a statue when we were wandering around, before we found you. Something about ‘Past and Present’. What’s that all about, and was one of them you?”

“Well, actually, they were both me. Me at twelve, and me just a few months ago,” Muriel said. “It’s the past looking to the near future, which is looking back at the past, as they both walk to a more distant future.”

“Who did it? That’s a marvelous piece of art!” the woman said. “I teach art in high school.”

“Well, depending on which version you saw, the life-sized statue was done by an Envoy, based on a model that I’d made. He made a few changes, like causing the hair and fly plaid to actually move like they were being wind blown,” Muriel said.

“I’ve got another question,” said a man. “Those action figures . . . well, I got my kids a set, and they ended up trained. Then they trained me. Then we get here, and two of the action figures translate in.”

“Oh, I see where THAT one’s going,” Muriel said, laughing. “Yes, they’re my friends. And the titles under their names are the real thing. They’re the twelve kids I brought in to Enclave before I was even finished being trained. And yes, they are all Ambassador, hence the name of the package.”

“Twelve friends. And you,” the man said. “There was supposedly another person that had twelve friends. And a whole bunch of religions are based on them.”

“What’s here is not a religion,” Muriel said. “And I certainly didn’t go around collecting just twelve friends in order to make it look similar. And, I’m certainly not a man,” she added, grinning. “But yes, I’ve noticed the similarity before, myself. Pure coincidence, I assure you. And now I understand why you seem so together. You all had the training before the training stations opened up, so you were already comfortable with the techniques. Well done. And well done to whoever trained you. Thank them for me, please.”

Then it occurred to Muriel that, if they’d been trained by family members, it would

account for the stripes they wore, but also meant that they wouldn't have gotten passports. So she held up the crowd and passed them out, too, and watched the wonder on their faces when they realized just why Enclave gave them anything they wanted or needed. They were Citizens of Home, and Enclave was the property of Home. Muriel went around to the individuals in the crowd, and shook hands with them and congratulated them on their achievements and on what they were attempting to do.

They filed out, slowly. Some to get rooms for the night. Others to wander around Enclave before they returned home. Muriel watched them go, still smiling, then translated back to her office.

"About time you showed up," Ted said, from his accustomed seat in her casual area.

"Problems?" asked Muriel

"Solutions," he replied. "The training stations are shut down. The switchover with the utilities worked flawlessly. Now all we need is some sort of mobilization to keep the untrained from trying to wreck things."

"Already covered," Muriel said. "That's where I've been. Training the people that are heading up the state mobilizations. Anything else?"

"Luke Air Force Base wants their planes back," Mata said.

"I thought we sent them back?" Muriel responded. "No, you're right. I thought about it, but never followed up on it. I've got to do something about that. I shouldn't leave things hanging like that. OK, who's doing the asking?"

"Another general. Higher rank than the last, if that means anything to you," Mata replied. "Going to go visit him?"

"Well, we need to know where to put them, and they need to know that the wheels aren't down," Muriel said. "Give me an image. And I'll need a squad."

"Four of them. And me. I think you might have to impress him, some," Mata said.

"Oh, like that, is it," Muriel made the question sound like a statement.

"Yea. Another one that believes that we don't have the right to defend ourselves, and should never have taken his toys away," Mata said. "I think he's a base commander, or wing commander, or whatever you call the top guy over there."

"Oh, goodie! Time for a lesson in humility. I'm surprised that General Stuart left him in place," Muriel said. "OK, humiliation time. We go in glowing. Bright. Show me the layout, so I have an idea of how to set things up." Mata did, along with the image of the General. And Muriel began looking like she enjoyed this, in a grim sort of way. She reached out for the minds of her squads, and suddenly the world got a LOT dimmer. Then they translated.

And, at Luke Air Force Base, there was the sound of a bell. A large bell. Well, actually, a VERY large bell, and the sound could be heard all over the base. And the General's office lit up from the inside.

Slowly, Muriel reduced the glow, and her squads did likewise. "Hello, General. I understand that you don't know how to talk politely when making a request. So, I guess I'll just have to teach you how. About your planes. We can bring them out for you, in one of two ways. Or, you can come and get them for yourself," Muriel said, quietly. "It would have been best if you'd just come to us and asked, politely. But you didn't. It would have been good if you'd just brought the men and equipment necessary to move them, yourselves. That would have been more difficult, for you and for us, but could have been arranged. And it would have shown that you were willing to get off your ass and do some work. But, that didn't happen, either, did it. So, now, I'll give you a choice. You can either sign a contract for immediate delivery of the planes, payable in advance, of course. Or we'll just render them down to component atoms, since we have no use for them." It should be noted that Muriel AND the squads were standing three feet in the air when she delivered this.

"Oh, and there's one other thing that I think you should know. A record of this, and the way you behaved toward my security chief, will be sent to the Secretary of the Air Force. And I really don't think that he's going to be pleased with what's happened. Especially since he's received the Envoy training a number of years ago, and knows who and what we are," Muriel added.

"And just who the hell do you think you are, ordering me around. I'm a General!" he said. "And you fancy gimmicky tricks don't impress me."

"Me? Oh, nobody important. Just the Ambassador to earth from Home, and the Leader of the People of Home," she said, showing him her passport. "Just someone that even the Queen of Britain, the President of Russia and the President of the United States know that it's not a good idea to try to bully. And you're merely a general. Choose, wisely," she added, echoing the words used in a movie about the Holy Grail. The obvious parallel was that the Grail of the movie was an ordinary wooden cup, just as she was an ordinary human girl.

"Well, I don't care who you think you are! You've stolen American property, and you WILL return it, immediately!" he said.

"Ah. You've found a third alternative. Very well. Squads two and three, retrieve the planes, please. And when you deliver them, pancake them into the runway. That way, we will have effected delivery. Try to make the craters as big as possible. No sense leaving him any way to attempt to retaliate and waste more of my time," Muriel said.

"WAIT! You can't do that! It would be destroying government property," he said, with a very shocked look.

"Hold up, squads," she said. Then turned back to the general and said, "So? It's not

OUR government. And I'm sure, when the record got out, that it would serve as an example to the rest of you petty military leaders that unarmed people with training can do more damage than all the might of the American armed forces. AND to better purpose," she said. "It really isn't a good idea to try to bully someone who's better at your job than you are. Insults and rudeness just aren't appropriate in those cases. Now, it's time for you to make your decision. We didn't make war on you. We weren't the ones that arrested your general for taking an unauthorized action. We didn't fly the planes, or release the missiles. We simply stopped the war before it could start. And now you want your planes back, but you don't want to pay the price. You're like a child that breaks a toy, then cries because daddy won't buy him a new one."

"General, we aren't the bad guys. Trained people are out there stopping crime, right now. Not through violence, but by simply and literally stopping the people that would act in a criminal manner. And they're putting out fires, and saving lives. They're going door to door and offering food, clothing, shelter, whatever is needed. Not because it makes them feel good or important, but simply because it needs to be done," Muriel said. "THIS is what those planes were sent to snuff out. You need to think about what is important. Your ego? Or the betterment of the United States." She looked at him for a moment, then turned her back on him.

"Mata, do we have a location for where the planes should be?" Muriel asked.

"Well, we've got a place to put them. It may not be exactly right, but it's where there's room for all of them, and they can sort it out for themselves," Mata replied.

"OK. Do it. Then let's get out of here. This place makes me feel like I was trying to bathe in dog shit," Muriel replied.

"Daughter! That's no way to talk," her mother said, translating in.

"Mom?"

"Don't you 'mom' me, young lady. You're giving dog shit a bad name. Now get it over with and let's go home. General Stuart will be here shortly to see to the rest of the problem," Lily said. And behind her two grinning squads translated out, then returned a minute later.

"It's done, Muriel," Mata said. "You can't help them all. And this one is so far past help that he isn't worth wasting words with." Muriel looked at her, then translated out, followed by her mother and her squads.

Chapter 33

Peace in Our Time

(Monday)

“Do you ever leave that chair?” Muriel asked as she came into the office.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Especially when the boss decides to take a field trip to stomp on some imbecile that can't understand that he's supposed to follow orders, or that tries to intimidate her,” Mata quipped back.

“Doesn't it get uncomfortable for you?” Muriel asked.

“Nope. No body,” Mata replied. “And to answer the next question, no it doesn't get boring. Sometimes it gets frustrating, like when I can't get the information I need to act on, or that you want. And actually, I DO get up and move around. Snacks and drinks, for example. They give me an opportunity to let my mind go over what's happening in a less 'gotta do it now' attitude. And yes, I COULD just create them. But the break away helps, sometimes. And thank you for thinking of that when you first came out here.”

“No thanks necessary. You're not machines. And it's easy to get trapped into just one way of looking at things,” Muriel said. “So, did things finally quiet down?”

“Yep. Calling in the FBI settled some of the city police departments and county sheriff's offices nicely. And, since they know that they're being monitored, and action may be taken against them if they don't straighten out, they're actually performing their duties like they're supposed to. A lot of the violence stopped when the various companies were closed down and the officers arrested. There are still pockets of malcontents, but since the trained can track them and notify the police when they start getting rough, a lot of those have stopped, too.”

“Anything on those companies?” asked Muriel.

“Yes,” Ted said, coming into her office. “Tracks from the ones doing the violence lead right back to the companies, and to the highest offices. We've been following the tracks, and some of them lead to other countries. Where we've got trained people and the same training program going on, those companies are closed, and their functions taken over by either the enclave or by wild trained people. This has made a serious impact on a number of countries and industries. And banks.”

“Oh, them again,” Muriel said.

“Yep. Some of them closed, or tried to. Enclaves moved in and took over before they could destroy their records. In some cases, the officers of the banks were arrested just because they tried to destroy the records. Come to find out, there was some significant mismanagement and skimming going on, using various dodges like bonuses, and the country

governments are in the process of clawing them back. Oh, and there are no longer any 'tax havens' or countries where money can go and be hidden. And suddenly a lot of smaller countries have the money to effectively help their people, which has opened up new opportunities for Enclaves. And then there's the UN."

"Don't tell me. Our 'usual suspects' are screaming again," Muriel said.

"Yep, and threatening nuclear action. And THAT'S a mistake they won't repeat. Every time one of them even whispers the nuclear word, Enclaves go in and reduce their nuclear capability to zero. Then they point to Iran. And suddenly, the countries begin to understand that threatening other countries is NOT the way to engage in international relations. So, now they're threatening to pull out of the UN," Ted said.

"The down side," Mata broke in, "is that many of the countries that suffered the worst abuses and violence are talking about becoming total Enclaves. Not the government. It's still fighting it. But the people, themselves, where the population is over seventy percent trained."

"Oh, joy!" Muriel said. "That's what I DIDN'T want to happen."

"I know," Mata replied. "But it was a possibility. The only problem is that many of the countries that are considering it don't have an Enclave or Ambassador."

"Is there any indication that the countries would accept an Enclave within their borders?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. And by that I mean that we've got no information. But, sooner or later, some wild trainee is going to start one WITHOUT the government's approval, and enforce it by throwing government and police out every time they show up," Mata said.

"OK. Executive decision time. Ted, I'm looking for input," Muriel said.

"Go. Visit the countries. Take a squad with you. My squads can handle things in America, and either I or your on-duty squad can let you know if anything international comes up," he said.

"Mata?"

"I'm going with you. But I agree with Ted. Fred has no trouble working with any of your squads or their members, so he keeps them informed on what he's working on. And they feed him information. Heck, I bet he'd even work with Ted's motley crew. Ted should go a roving, too, and introduce himself to the people heading up the state's clean up. You DO trust him to act for you, don't you?" asked Mata.

"Well . . . yes, I guess I trust him," Muriel said, and grinned. "Seriously, his methods are different, but sound. And he's already done a lot for this country, if they only realized it. He even pushed for the training stations, and I had NO idea how that would turn out. But he actually put it together. OK, when do we go, and where first?"

“South America. Then Europe. Major countries, only, at this point,” Mata said. “And some of them I have no idea how they started getting trained. We had no Ambassador in the country, and no training stations. But there are obviously trained people there, and they’re settling the countries down rather well. I’d like to know how they started.”

“OK,” Muriel said, “then I’m going to need a bunch of languages. Then, if there’s no emergencies, we should probably get started.”

“Oh, oh. Maybe not quite yet,” Mata said. “Reception just notified me that there’s two lawyers to see you. One is representing the pharmaceutical manufacturers. The other represents that nasty biotech company that created all those artificial plants, then sued people when the genes migrated to neighboring fields that hadn’t been planted with them.”

“Oh, them. I’m surprised we didn’t hear from them back when the whole thing with the AMA went down. OK, what do we have on these people?” asked a very disgusted Muriel.

“Why don’t you let me handle it,” Ted said. “That way you can see that I actually CAN do your job,” he added, grinning.

“You want me to stay and watch?” asked Muriel, incredulous.

“Yep. Mata, have Reception bring them to my office. Muriel, why don’t you change into civies, and come sit in my office. That way,” Ted said, with some seriousness, “if things go pear shaped you can bail me out, and show me what I did wrong.”

“You’re serious! OK. How about jeans and blouse?” asked Muriel. “That way I’ll look like someone’s kid sister.” And they translated out.

“You scared me when you said ‘jeans and blouse,’” Ted said. “I immediately thought of the way you came to Enclave, the first time – like a grubby kid. These, though, look like designer clothes. GOOD look, by the way.”

“Yea, I’ve got a bunch of clothes that suit my age, and make me look like a rich girl with no brains,” she kidded. “They come in handy if I decide to wander around in the real world, and get a feel of how people act and what the needs are. I’ve been doing that for a while, now. Mostly on weekends when things were quiet. Oh, oh. Here they come. Places, everyone. It’s show time!” she quipped, and Ted laughed, just as the lawyers came in.

“Gentlemen. Come in. My name is Ted. I’m Ambassador from Home to the people of America. Have a seat. What can I do for you?” he ‘machine gunned’ out, like this was a standard formula statement he used all the time.

“We have some serious matters to discuss,” one of them said. “Perhaps it would be better if your girlfriend found somewhere else to be for a while.”

“Oh, I don’t think that will be necessary. For one thing, she isn’t my girlfriend. And for

the second, she's hear to learn how I do things,” Ted said, though Muriel caught the slight coloration in his face when the lawyer had said 'girlfriend'. He then firmly added, “She stays.”

“Very well, it's come to our attention that you are encouraging inappropriate behavior in people . . .” he started, when Ted interrupted him.

“What behavior. Please be specific. And factual. This isn't an office that pussyfoots around matters. If you have a problem, spell it out, now,” he said.

“Very well, you've got people convinced that they no longer need medication because of some sort of faith healing you people are performing,” he said.

The second lawyer chimed in, “And people are breaking contracts with us, saying that seed grain that we provide is no longer being used by them. Impossible, since we're the only source of the seed that they've been using for years.”

“Well . . . interesting. First, for you, sir,” he said, pointing to the first lawyer, “the medical methods and procedures that were developed by humans and Envoys, and are used by those trained in the techniques have been accredited by the Secretary of Education for the United States, and for every other country that has Enclaves. Further, the medical boards of each of the countries has found that those methods and procedures actually work. I think your actual complaint is that you're no longer making the money off the drugs you produce because more people have the basic training to no longer get sick. Sorry, sir, but nobody guaranteed you a profit. You've had a long run, but it's essentially over.”

“I don't think so,” the first lawyer said. “We are filing for an injunction against you or any of your so-called trained people. You will be forbidden to practice such procedures anywhere in the United States unless you pay us a percentage of what you receive.” Muriel's eyebrows went up at that statement. “And you, young lady, will refrain from raising your eyebrows at me. You have no idea what I'm talking about.”

“That's a rather bold statement to make to this young lady,” Ted said. “Also, it's doubtful if such an injunction would pass ANY Federal court. This was all dealt with four years ago. If you haven't seen the records of the cases, then I suggest that you start searching. And, as for your 'guaranteed profit . . . well, it never was actually guaranteed. It's just that you've been getting it for so long that you feel you're entitled to it. Nope. Never happen. And as for you, the seedy lawyer,” Ted added, and Muriel nearly choked, “I think, if I were to turn my lawyers loose to examine the situation, we'd find that you didn't actually have contracts with these people UNLESS they used your product. If they choose to NOT use your product, then you have no contract.”

“You! Girl! Why do you keep making the strange looks when we say something?” the second lawyer asked.

Muriel calmly looked at him and, in a thick Russian accent, said, “I here to learn. To see how Mister Ted deal with nekulturny . . . how you say . . . uncultured people. Demanding money for nothing. Next you'll be wanting chicks for free,” and Ted choked. “I know some

American law. These things do NOT happen.” This time, Ted gave her a warning look. “First, you not come to principal to make complaint. You go to lawyer, instead”

Ted interrupted, “Drop the accent. Even Anna didn't have one that bad when you first made her and Ambassador, and she's only twelve.”

“OK. Gentlemen, you're on a fishing expedition. And you don't even have the license to fish these waters. You're so far out of your depth that even with waders six feet higher than your heads you'd still get wet. I suggest that you go back to your principals, and return the retainer. That is, if you want to retain your license to practice law,” Muriel said, without accent.

“Who the hell do you think you are, telling us that?” the first demanded.

“I don't have to 'think' who I am. I KNOW who I am. I'm Muriel. Leader of Home and Ambassador to the people of earth,” she replied, and pulled out her passport and switching to the fighting class 'A's that she normally wore. “Ted's told you where you stand. And I'm telling you that the Bar Association will pull your licenses to practice law in any form if you persist in this ridiculous attempt at extortion. If your companies can't compete, then they're done. Period. You can try branching out into other products or services, but I think you'll find that trained people can do things faster and better than you can, and without destroying the earth in the process. So, just toddle along back to the companies and let them know that their attempt was met with terminal resistance, and that you're removing yourselves from the cases.”

“You have NO idea how serious this situation is!” the first hollered.

“Alice. The Federal laws regarding extortion. What were they called, again?” Muriel said.

Alice translated in and said, “I think what you're looking for is the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act – otherwise known as the Rico Act. It includes such things as extortion.”

“Thank you, Alice. The name had slipped my mind,” Muriel said.

“Yea, right. I'll believe that one when pigs fly,” Alice said.

“Well, I suggest that you get an umbrella, then, because I think a flight of them are passing overhead, now,” Muriel responded, grinning at her lawyer. “Seriously, gentlemen, the fact that you're coming to us like mob enforcers and without any documentation, trying to get money from us, makes you co-conspirators in this matter. You'd not only lose your license to practice law, but could end up in jail under the Rico Act. I think it's time you thought about your future, and whether or not you'll have one. Good day, gentlemen,” she added with finality. And they fled. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ted making notes on his tablet. Finally, he stopped.

"OK," he said. "Maybe I'm NOT ready to take over your position. And I thought *I* was aggressive. You just blew the doors off anything that I could have done."

"But you saw how I did it?" asked Muriel.

"Yea, but I'm not sure that I can do anything like it," he responded.

"Hmm. Well, it's true that you're pure rage, but you're not outraged. You also may not have the knowledge that you need to back up some of the things. Get law, and Bobby's version of psychology. Oh, and check with Betty. She may have something to help you find the holes in arguments, and how to fill them. And don't be afraid to holler for help," Muriel said. "Speaking of which . . . Alice, thank you for responding so quickly. And it actually had slipped my mind – the full title, that is. I knew it was called the Rico Act, but I couldn't remember quickly enough what the formal title was. Besides, by calling you in it showed them that we are informed and represented. It swept their legs out from under them."

"Ted, don't try to be me. Be yourself. Your style was good, and you'd have gotten the point across, sooner or later. I was the one that queered it by reacting to some of the statements," Muriel apologized. "'Seedy lawyer' almost had me laughing. I didn't think you had it in you to come up with something like that. But THAT was GOOD. Though I think, in their case, it was more of a DVD," which caused Ted to choke, then laugh. "You've surprised me a few times, but I think this time topped them. No, I think all you lack is a little extra in education that you haven't needed before. Betty can handle all that, and would be happy to help.

"You suggested I talk to Bobby. Why?" he asked.

"Because he knows about rage. And the difference between rage and outrage. And how to change the first, which is emotional, into the second, which is an act," she said. "I wouldn't expect you to get it right, right off the bat. But it would help you to understand how I do some of the things I do. And now, I think I'd better get ready to go. We really need the information on the other countries. We can't just trust that they'll be set up right."

Chapter 34

The Walk Around the World

(Tuesday to two weeks later)

After getting a large load of languages and dialects, Muriel thought that she'd be ready to start her trip. Then, some of her friends changed the whole thing. Don, Bobby and Tommy felt that they should go with her. So, then it was a round of getting languages for them, as well as figuring out what it was that they'd be doing on the trip. So, it wasn't until Tuesday morning that they started out.

They started with Brazil. There had been no training stations in Brazil, since the country's government hadn't wanted an Enclave and wouldn't accept an Ambassador. The first thing that Muriel had to do was find some of those that had been trained, to find out how much training they had, and where they got it. That didn't take long. They found her.

Within minutes of their translating to Brazil, there was a small crowd around them, chattering to each other about the strange people in gray, and were they Envoys. One of them finally came up to Don and, in halting English, asked him if he was an Envoy. He replied in Portuguese that no, he was American, and introduced himself as a trainer. Then he introduced Bobby, and Tommy who was wearing the red tunic of the Rescue and Recovery unit, and explained what their jobs were.

Then everyone looked expectantly at Muriel, and Don introduced her. The mention of her being the Ambassador to earth and the Leader of Home brought an unexpected result. She was quickly surrounded by people who wanted to touch her. Not threatening. More like awe, and just assuring themselves that she was real, and really there. For such a close and space invasive situation, they were actually quiet respectful of her.

"How did so many of you get trained?" Muriel asked.

"My sister lives in America, and came to visit, yesterday. It was unexpected. One moment she was in America, and the next she was standing in front of us," one of the men said. "And she did other things that were unbelievable. We asked her how she did them, and she taught us. There are many more, now, all over the country."

"Where is your sister, now?" Muriel asked.

"She had to go back to America. She was afraid that if the government knew that she had come in without going through customs, that she'd be arrested," he replied. "But she taught us how to teach others, and it's spreading, fast. Did we do something wrong, mistress?"

"No. Not from my standpoint. And it's just Muriel. I'm just a girl doing a job," she said. "Not someone important."

"Oh, mistress, of course you are important," he replied. "You brought the training to this world, and made it possible for one such as I to learn. That is very important."

"Yes, the work is important. But as you, yourselves, know, anyone can do it that's been trained. I'm simply the first one trained on earth," Muriel replied. "And what you have been doing is important, too, in training others. Very important, and you should all be proud of your achievements." ::Mata,:: she sent.

::They've all made the trip home, Muriel. But some of them don't have the 'battlefield first aid' course.::

"Now, I understand from my security chief that some of you haven't had the 'battlefield first aid' course that we give all new trainees," Muriel added. "I'd like you to come forward, and we'll give it to you now. This course will allow you, if you can get to a person with wounds before they die, to save their life and maybe have them completely healed before medical help can arrive. I know. My friends and I used it in a nasty accident when we were twelve years old. And an older friend of mine and I saved two women that had been partially crushed by a truck falling on them."

A number of people came forward, and Muriel's squad moved to meet them and give them the course. When they were through, Muriel gave them their passports and the spiel that went with them. She also told them about the courses that Home offered, and the Guest privileges they had with any of the Enclaves. Afterward, she went to the man that had acted as their leader and asked him if he'd like to become the Ambassador to Brazil, and told him what the job entailed.

"But mistress"

"Just Muriel. If I have to trot out the titles, then it's because somebody is in serious trouble, and it isn't me," she replied. "Go ahead, try it."

"M-M-Muriel," he stammered, "I'm just a poor man. How can I be an Ambassador?"

"I was just a poor twelve year old girl," Muriel replied. "But I learned. So can you. We'll give you courses to help you along, and of course a salary for doing the job. I'll bring you in, after I've made the rounds of the other countries, and teach you what I know. OK?"

"Oh, Muriel! That is so much more than I had hoped for. I just wanted to meet the amazing people that had started the training. Yes, I will be your Ambassador, if that's what you want," he replied.

And so it went, through countless countries where 'wild' training was taking place. Muriel and a squad, and very often some of her friends, met with new trainees and found out that the sources of the training were people visiting countries where the training stations were located. They'd get trained, then return to their countries and train others, and it would spread from there. Or people living in countries with training stations would visit countries without the stations – usually because they had friends or relatives there, and again the training would

spread. In two days, it was determined that about fifty percent of the populations of such countries were trained.

Invariably, the training took hold mostly in the lower and middle income areas of the population, with some small percentage of trained people in the upper income brackets. Having money wasn't the deterrent to being able to be trained. What kept some people away was the attitude they had toward other people and society in general. Those that believed that they had the right to live off the work of others tended to be unable to take the training.

A study in Home was unable to determine whether this sociopathic tendency was something learned, or whether it was an aberration of the human condition. The nature/nurture argument took on a new perspective with this study. The only thing that was positively determined was that this tendency would eventually be bred out of humans because of its incompatibility with the training. Trained people would invariably avoid having sociopathic mates, and sociopaths would avoid and despise those with the training. Natural selection at its simplest and most severe.

One of the major up sides of the training stations was that it broke the stranglehold that large corporations and 'big money' had on both government and society. Corporations that made the mistake of going after the Enclaves or trained people quickly found themselves without workers or even closed due to criminal activities. Government representatives began to realize that the funds they'd relied on for re-election were no longer available because the big corporations were no longer funding them. They couldn't. They were either closed because of the criminal activity or going bankrupt because they no longer had a market for their products.

Lawsuits were another situation. They spiked, briefly, as corporations thought they could grab the methods and procedures that Envoy trained people used. After the first few were laughed out of court, and the businesses failed or were closed, that dropped off to nothing.

And another up side was that country governments quickly learned that it was impossible to hold trained people in the country. A trained person could visit any country where they had an image to work from. Likewise, customs enforcement was impossible. After all, how can you enforce payola to the government on goods when they don't pass through a customs check point? But along with the disappointment of the governments in trying to enforce immigration and customs regulations, they quickly learned that trained individuals were not likely to bring anything dangerous or in conflict with internal trade and businesses. After all, they didn't need to. They could just create the things, themselves, if they were needed. Besides, the businesses that the customs checkpoints were supposed to be protecting had either been closed down by the police, or gone bankrupt in the two weeks that Muriel went country-hopping.

"How'd it go?" Ted asked, when she finally returned to her office.

"UGH! I think I broke my smile," Muriel replied. "Thanks for your suggestion of using other Ambassadors to cover some of the countries. I hit about 42 of them. If I'd tried to hit

196, I'd STILL be out talking to people. However, it's finished. We've got Ambassadors in all the countries that had wild trained people, and things are settling down."

"Well, the thing that clued me in was that the countries we have Enclaves in were doing the same thing with their own people, then looking around at the other countries and wondering what was happening," Ted said. "Glad I could help out."

"You did. Just contacting them and telling them what I was doing, then coordinating them all – and me – so there wasn't any duplication helped," Muriel replied. "So, how are things here?"

"Not bad, actually," Ted said. "They've stopped throwing lawsuits at us. Mainly because they ran out of 'they'. Melanie linked a major push to eliminate us to most of the major industries. They were shut down, and all their patents and copyrights were up for grabs. We won. Then there were the businesses that went into bankruptcy, and we picked up more patents and copyrights, there."

"So, what do we do with all of them?" asked Muriel.

"Public Domain," Ted replied. "It also settled much of the 'software wars', because many of the companies were heavily involved in software patents and copyrights."

"Wall Street?" she asked.

"Sputtering. I expect the end of that snake-pit some time in the next week or so," he responded. "There just isn't the volume of business to support it. The banks are screaming, because they have to actually behave themselves. OH! You didn't know. Congress passed a law that regulates the behavior of both Wall Street and the banks. They aren't allowed to use computers to make robot buys and sells, so they can't manipulate what market is left. Commodities are the same way. That market is still going strong, but is heavily regulated, too. And no one is allowed to lock in a commodity to the exclusion of all others. I don't know the math of it," he said, "but it amounts to breaking the possibility of one company gaining a monopoly on the market, then charging whatever they want for the commodities."

"So, what kinds of businesses are still running?" asked Muriel.

"Mostly, I'm seeing change, right now, and projecting what's happening. Well, believe it or not, food and clothing are still going, but changed in the way they do things," Ted said. "Most of them are using Envoy techniques, now. Or soon will be. Some engineering and architectural firms are switching over, too. Cars, computers, phones and software you pretty much know about. Services such as restaurants and the like are still going strong, though some have switched to Envoy techniques. As well as surface transportation, like taxis and buses. Air travel is beginning to fade out. It's tough to compete with someone that can just translate to a destination. Same with trains for passengers, except for excursion trains."

"So, an economy based on money and worth are still going," Muriel said. "Good. What you're saying is pretty much what Chun did with China, except that she 'nationalized' the

whole thing immediately, then parceled it back out. Well, mainly because so much of it was actually nationalized to begin with.”

“Oh, by the way,” Ted said. “Japan now has an Enclave. Chun went over and visited, and got permission to name an Ambassador, with the understanding that she wasn’t trying to take over the country. They accepted, and she found someone trustworthy and intelligent to take the position. So, we set it up just as we did in other countries – buying the land, and paying the taxes ahead. It’s smaller than most, but seems to be running fine. They got training stations set up, and now a good portion of the population has gotten the training.”

“That’s good. I’ve had to tell most of the new Ambassadors that they couldn’t set up an Enclave until the government was willing to accept them. I’m expecting a few countries are going to find themselves with a bloodless revolution, shortly,” Muriel said. “Others simply said that it didn’t fit their lifestyles, and have opted to simply be roving Ambassadors.”

“You look beat. Why don’t you call it an early day, and we can talk about what’s next, tomorrow,” Ted said.

“You know? I honestly don’t know what’s next. I just wanted to stop the violence before somebody got hurt,” Muriel said. “Yea, we will have to talk, tomorrow. And figure out just what’s happened, and what the projections are for the future.” And she translated to her apartment.

When she was gone, Mata sat back in the chair and relaxed. Then relaxed again and grew, and became male. And Ted stared, then staggered back a bit into the chair that Matthew had conveniently placed behind him.

“Mat . . . ?”

“Don’t say a word to her,” Matt said. “She doesn’t know. When she first came out here and set up the office, she gave us all the best gift that she could have given us and didn’t even know it. Having down time allows us to relax and resume our normal selves. Or maybe ‘retain’ would be a better word. But I couldn’t relax around her on that whirlwind tour. Mata IS becoming more human. But Matthew isn’t. Same with the rest, particularly the ones that look and act her age. We have the advantage of being able to analyze what we’ve experienced as quasi humans, and learn even more from that.”

“But”

“Oh, we don’t do it all the time. And only when we’re sure that we won’t be disturbed for about an hour. And we enjoy being quasi human,” Matt went on. “Some of your crew do it, too. So don’t be surprised if sometime you find them looking different. And maybe acting a bit different.”

“Why . . . ?”

“It isn’t just the experience of a body that makes the difference,” Matt said. “It’s the

construction of the brain. The number of connections is important. But more so is the way those connections are made. There's a team in Home trying to analyze it, now, to see if there's a way to combine the two structures – that of the soul and that of the brain. So far, from what they've been able to tell, a soul that's had the experience of a human body thinks differently from one that's never left Home. So far, it looks like the best combination is actually a soul that's IN a body of a person that's been connected. It somehow makes uses of the best qualities of both. Next best is a soul that's had human experience. We Envoys are further down the list than I originally thought. Which is another thing they're trying to determine, is why Envoy thinking is different from a soul in a human body. HOW are we different. Well, we'll get it sometime. But for now, it helps if I can kinda get outside of myself and look at how Mata has developed, and how it differs from Matthew.”

“So, you have your own agenda going,” Ted said.

“Not really. We're out to improve both sides, human and Envoy. Originally, it was just to improve Envoys,” Matthew said. “But then first you, then Muriel came along and showed us that humans were more than just an 'experiment'. They were an end in themselves. One that completed Envoys, yes. But also one that Envoys completed. Oh . . . I'm not sure I can actually explain it. It's just a feeling. The real point,” he said, “is that there's no way we would consider ending the 'human experiment'. It's no longer an experiment, but a path of its own.”

“So nice to hear that you're not going to end us,” Ted said, dryly.

“Heh,” Matthew said. “Yea, that didn't come out right, did it. The idea of ending the experiment is the old, pre-parasite thought. Not something we've ever considered since you and Muriel came into our lives. Despite all the troubles that humans have caused on earth, you have value just in being you. And you and Muriel have worked hard to help us understand ourselves and recover at least part of our history. And, I keep wondering where humans will take us, next.”

Chapter 35

“And All Our Yesterdays”
(Wednesday morning)

Muriel came down and, instead of going to her desk as usual, went to her recliner. There, with a cup of coffee, she simply sat, staring at her phone and the new tablet that Jeff had come up with. Mata noted that she seemed a bit pensive, but not down about anything. Just that she was thinking heavily about something.

“Mata . . . are you busy?” she finally said.

“Not particularly,” Mata replied. “And never too busy to talk. What's up?”

“Come on in here. I want to show you something,” Muriel said, still looking at the phone and tablet – first one, then the other. Mata came in and sat beside her charge, wondering what had so fascinated her.

“Mata,” Muriel started, “humans have had a bloody run. And mostly because of how we think. We have to constantly be in competition with each other. It's what has promoted wars throughout history. It's what caused the rise in sociopathic behavior – almost a survival characteristic. Something like 'the more I have, the more secure I am and better able to defend myself' attitude. In all, I'm really surprised that Envoys would even bother with us.”

“Well, mostly,” Mata said, “except for a small group, we pretty much ignored you. You were part of that small group. So was Ted. One of the few humans that they let in,” she added reflectively. “But when he was killed and hit Home in a rage, destroying the parasite, the rest of us definitely took notice.”

“You weren't part of that group?” Muriel asked.

“Nope. Nor was Bart. Or, for that matter, any of the members of either your or Ted's squads. No . . . Bart and I were the first two to reach him when he finally let the Judgment take hold, after he'd freed us,” she said. “We thought he was a threat, and were going to destroy him. 'Defend Home'. Yea, right. By the time we'd reached him, we realized what he'd actually done – freeing us. So, instead of destroying him, we talked to him.”

“So, you were in on the original planning of creating an Enclave with Ted as an Ambassador?” Muriel asked.

“Yea. Pretty much. Oh, there were others. Including that group you headed as Az. That's what caused us all to look at Ted as the Leader of Home. He organized us and gave us a real purpose, instead of simply being something feeding that monster,” Mata said. “That's when some of us began to realize that there was a difference between the way you think and the way we think. Not good or bad, just different. Well . . . maybe good, but we really didn't see it, then. It wasn't until you came along that we began to understand the

difference was good and had a purpose. And you ended up unlocking what that purpose was. And suddenly, WE had a purpose, too. And thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome. Though I can’t take credit for it. I was just reacting to situations as they came up. Unless you’re thanking me because you LIKE herding me around and trying to keep me out of trouble,” Muriel said, grinning.

“Actually, I DO like herding you around and trying to keep you out of trouble,” Mata said, returning the grin. “I also like seeing you get INTO trouble, and then get out of it. And then there’s the way you think. You put things together that other people would just overlook. Like turning flying into a game.”

“YOU did that. You handed me a ball and told me to go play with my friends,” Muriel said. “So don’t blame me for that!”

“I didn’t tell you to combine it with flying, though,” Mata replied. “Nor did I tell you to unpeg poor Arthur’s mind, so he could think clearly, and give us more understanding of where you insane creatures came from. OR how to figure out how to make weapons out of something we only used for effect – fire. OR how to give the Air Force weapons that didn’t cost anything – rocks. Really, you could say I love you for your mind.” And Muriel laughed.

“Well, playing tit for tat, YOU never told me that there was a difference between the way humans thought and the way Envoys thought,” Muriel said. And Mata felt a cold chill. “I’ll have to look into that. After all, I have an Envoy soul, I ought to be able to figure out the difference between us.”

“Muriel . . . ?”

“Now, now, Mata. When you seem to drop out on me, without dropping out? And I look, mentally, and it’s Matthew instead of Mata sitting in the chair?” Muriel said. “That should have clued me in. And it isn’t just the difference in having a body, is it? It’s something else. Never mind, Mata. But you don’t have to hide it from me. Remember? I knew that you were male, originally, even before I got home the first night. So, anytime you need to make the change, I’ll understand. And it won’t change the way I interact with you. I promise.”

“Muriel . . . I”

“You’re not ashamed of being an Envoy, are you? There’s certainly no reason for you to be. After all, if it weren’t for you, and others like you, humans STILL wouldn’t be trained,” Muriel said. “Or is it that you were afraid that I’d find out that you were trying to find out the difference between human and Envoy thinking. Well, never mind. Not important. Well, the differences between the way we think is. But not that you were trying to figure it out. Let me know if you figure it out, will you? I’d get involved, but I’ve already got a lot to deal with. Oh, if you ask questions, or want to do a scan or something, I’m game. I just can’t take it on as an active project, right now. You understand, don’t you?”

“You’re not upset?” Mata finally managed.

"Nope. Sounds like a worthwhile project. Do you have enough people helping you with it?" asked Muriel.

"Oh."

"Mata, I came down on you, hard, once. ONCE! And that was just after I got here, and you gave me that phone. Once you let me know what actually happened, I backed down. You let me know what the actual situation was, and that was it. And since then," she added, "I've always been careful to get the facts before I come down on someone. And, as a result, I've never made that mistake with you again. I did with Taylor, but that was different circumstances. And I hope that THAT one never happens again. And I think that it's the ONLY other time that it happened."

"I was afraid you'd think that I didn't like being female, or being young, or something," Mata said.

"Nope. You never acted that way with me, or even hinted at it. And there's been a number of times, over the years, when I've offered you the opportunity to go back to being male, or even just take a break or resign from the position," Muriel said. "And you've always refused. So, I figured it had to be something else. So, I ran a scan of your mind, and a scan of mine. Oh, I know, that really isn't proper procedure, scanning myself. But it did lead me to thinking about some other things."

"What?" asked Mata.

"I'm glad you asked," Muriel said, and Mata hit her. "Look at the phone, and how it's constructed. Then look at the tablet. See the difference?"

"Hmm. Yes. The memory structure is different. So is the way it looks at problems or programs. But you have to look deep to catch it, because it's part of the shield structure," Mata said.

"OK, now scan my brain. NOT my mind. My brain. I think Jeff's been looking into Artificial Intelligence programming, and this is level two," Muriel said. "He's tried to set it up the same way that the human brain is constructed. That may indicate why the Envoy soul couldn't be just dumped into an infant human mind. The infant mind and brain aren't developed enough to handle it. In fact, the adult human mind and brain only just makes it. Does Mark know about that?"

"I do, now," Mark said. "Fascinating. And you've got a point there."

"You mean, besides the one on the top of my head?" asked Muriel. Mark growled, then shook his head.

"I should know better than to leave you a way to 'misinterpret' what I say," Mark said. "But really, we knew that the infant brain didn't have room. And you've just shown us why."

And I think what you're saying is that the tablet has about the capacity of a ten year old."

"Yea. And that disturbs me," Muriel said. "I think that Jeff is trying to get it even higher. What happens when it hits the point where your tablet is actually a person?"

"Would it be?" asked Mark.

"Well, the tablet already has about the number of connections to cause it to be aware, and maybe even the beginnings of intelligence," Muriel said.

Mark looked stunned. "How?"

"Shields are semi-intelligent," Muriel said. "The tablet is made out of layers of shields. Actually, so are the phone and computer. It's just that he's found a way to increase the number of layers, yet keep it small. Now, look at my brain. The top layer"

"Neocortex," Mark absent-mindedly tossed in.

". . . yea, that. It's in layers. And they cross-connect vertically as well as laterally," Muriel finished. "He did the same sort of thing with the shields."

"He's trying to model the human brain!" Mark exclaimed. "He can't do that! Can he?"

"I don't see why not," Muriel retorted. "But is that really the way he wants to go?"

"No," said a voice from her left, and Jeff walked into the room. "No, it isn't. But it's a start at understanding where I DO want to go. Mata, you and the others in here have been looking at the differences between Envoys and Humans. May I have the information you have?"

"Jeff?" Muriel interrupted, "WHAT are you trying to do?"

"Merge human and Envoy. I think it can be done, but I have to know how the connections work first," he replied. "I'm not even close, yet. And the shields will stay at a lower level UNTIL I do know. And know the consequences of developing the whole thing. We'll all talk before I even get the level of complexity close to that. The tablets are inhibited, and purpose tasked. A brain, either real or made of shields, CAN'T be inhibited that way. That's 'experiment four'. It's what the Envoys were working toward when the parasite took over. Arthur finally got past his humiliation. He's writing up what he knows and remembers, now. But I got a glimpse of it about a month ago."

"I didn't know that," Mark said. "Chuck! Come here, please."

"Yea, Mark?"

"Chuck, did you know that Arthur made a breakthrough?" Mark asked.

"Yea. Of course. I was there when he made it. But he asked me to keep it quiet until he could get it all written up," Chuck said. "Jeff was there. He'll tell you."

"The thing is, Mark – and maybe you, too, Mata – that it isn't just the brain that has to change, but the mind," Jeff said. "That's where your research comes in, Mata. Your 'brain', if you will – the shields that make up an Envoy – are structured differently than the human brain. And the mind is also structured differently. I need to know those differences."

"Jeff, is this wise?" asked Muriel.

"I think so. So do a lot of Envoys. This was the goal of creating humans, was to create a being that would encompass both worlds," he said. "Muriel, I'm NOT going to take that step until I've talked with you and Ted, Mata and Bart. It's too big for one person alone to shoulder. Mata and Bart are in touch with those working on the problem from Home. Oh, and they feel the same way I do – that it needs discussion before anything is ever enacted."

"You're talking about creating Homo Caelestis," Muriel said, flatly.

"Or Envoy Caelestis," was Jeff's rejoinder. "Or, maybe it's Envoy Terestrius. Anyway, that's going to be part of the discussion, WHEN we reach that point. Along with all the safeguards we can think of. No clichés, Muriel. I'm not a mad scientist. Just a guy trying to help complete a task that's been a long time coming."

Muriel sighed. "OK, I trust you, Jeff. "I think you understand my concern."

"You bet I do," he said. "I used to watch those movies right along with you. And watched all the television shows that featured the theme of 'runaway intelligence' or some such. AND read the same science fiction that you did. Nope. 'Best intentions' don't work, here. We have to be sure. Once we're sure of where we're going, THEN is the time for tiny steps. It may take another six hundred years, for all I know, before we're ready to unleash even a part of the goal. The point is that it at least LOOKS achievable. So, you can stop thinking of Macbeth and all his 'yesterdays'. We have time for all his 'tomorrows' and their petty pace. If there's any doubt, it doesn't happen."

"Now THAT DID make me feel better," Muriel said. "OK, Mata, if you can give Jeff the information that your research has come up with at this time, then maybe he can even help you with it."

"Jeff, you may not understand what we give you," Mata said.

"Then I'll just have to keep asking questions until I do understand it," he replied. "Besides, I expected that it would be in a form that Envoys would understand, so I'll just pass it to my soul, and let it sort it out." That caused Mata to grin. Then she changed to male adult, and spent ten minutes passing it to him. And Muriel, Chuck and Mark just stayed silent, realizing that this was a massive dump that was being sent.

"OK," Jeff finally said, breaking the silence. "I see why you changed to an adult male."

That was your control . . . is your control Hmm, tenses are getting confused, here. And I think I'd better stick to cars for a while, and let my soul chew on it. And it's from more than one point of view. There were others engaged in this?"

"Oh, yes. Both of the 'child' squads, since we all 'grew up' together. There are other controls, too. Betty's squad, for example, as well as squad one – Carl's old squad," she replied.

"Were you able to get anything from Carl?" he asked.

"No. Why? We didn't start the research until after he started being Fred's shadow," Mata said.

"Because Fred is different. And Carl is a 'halfway' between Fred and a normal Envoy," Jeff said. "If it's possible, sometime when he's on down time, and ONLY if he agrees, perhaps you could run a scan of him for me."

"Sure. I'll ask. But why?" she asked.

"Because Fred is kinda at the extreme of the Envoy spectrum. It might give us further insights," he replied.

"Hell," Mata drawled out. "I didn't think of that. You're trying to shape the bell curve, aren't you?"

"Yep," Jeff replied. "Exactly. By knowing the differences between him and normal Envoys, we might get a better look at how Envoy minds and brains are structured."

"I think he'd do it. I'll ask. Fred might even let us scan him, too. He's always been easy about people looking in his mind," Mata said. "And, since Carl is halfway between normal and whatever Fred is, that would give you a further reference."

Chapter 36

Do You Want Fries With That?

(Wednesday afternoon)

“Mata?” Muriel asked.

“They're waiting for you in the training room at Guest House,” Mata said. “Oh, and we've got Envoys to mesh mind so that dumps of information and courses can be accomplished quickly.”

“Wait a minute! I didn't even ask you, yet,” Muriel said.

“I know,” Mata said, with a smug expression on her face. “I'm good.”

“Goof! You're just reading what I think I need to do next,” Muriel said.

“Yep. See? I TOLD you I was good,” Mata replied, grinning. “I've got to stay ahead of you, somehow. Oh, and Betty's going with you.”

“I guess I'd better get over there, then. Oh, do they have tablets?” asked Muriel

“Yep, and they were shown how to use them,” Mata said. “Sorry, you aren't going to catch me out that way.”

“Humph! That sounds like a challenge, to me,” Muriel said. “All right. Betty? Ready to go?”

“Yep. Let's do it. I've got quite a package to give them. Plus, you'll have to let them know how to use some of the information,” Betty said. They translated out

. . . into Bedlam. The training room was filled with laughing people, roaming around and greeting each other – or trying to. Many of them had no common language. Muriel sent out a request to the Envoys to get people quieted down and in their seats, so she could at least cure THAT problem. And it only took Betty moments to pass the English language to the Envoys, to pass to their charges.

“OK,” Muriel said, “now I haven't had the opportunity to meet you all before now. For that, I apologize. And I'd like to thank all the national Ambassadors that helped me out in finding you people and making sure you were set up with the basics. So, here's what we're going to do. Betty is going to pass various courses to you that will help with your new jobs. That's going to take a while, even just passing them to your Envoy soul to sort out. So, please be patient. When that's done, we'll take a break and let things settle in, and I'll try to meet with some of you that I didn't have a chance to meet in person.”

And Betty did just that. Along with regular courses on management and accounting

and law, she also included 'how-to's' like flying and creating food, clothing and other necessary objects. Also, how to create the converters that powered homes and hospitals, provided water, and eliminated sewage and garbage. And how to manage the mesh mind. Finally, a break was called, and Muriel started her rounds of meeting people.

"You have no idea, mistress, what this means to us," one of the women said.

"It's just Muriel. And yes, I DO know what it means to you. Because it meant and still means the same to me," she replied. "I wasn't born with this. I was in elementary school when my training began. It meant that I'd never have to worry about bullies again. It meant that I actually KNEW things like how various disciplines were connected. It also meant that now I could do things that I hadn't even dreamed were possible. It's why I don't consider myself special. Each of you is capable of doing wondrous things, now. You have the basics, and we've given you some of the things that we've come up with over the years."

"But mistress! You've done so many things," the woman said.

"Mostly, because of necessity. Necessity isn't so much the mother of invention as it is the father of desperate action," Muriel said. "You will do many things, too. In your own way and in your own time. You'll even be outrageous, in your own way. And you will pass things on to others – ideas, ways of doing things. I know, because I've seen it with my friends and how they've developed. And it's still just Muriel."

And so it went, all around the room. Reassuring people that this wasn't an end point, but just a beginning. That they each had capabilities that went beyond the basic training. And that they'd each find their own solutions to problems. Mostly, she encouraged these new Ambassadors to use their new abilities – to find ways to make life easier for themselves and others. She used her parents and how they did dishes as an example. She also told them how the Envoys that were their squad grabbed the idea and had so much fun with it that her parents never did dishes again. And, she introduced the Envoys to the individuals as being their new security chiefs, and the foundation of their Enclaves, if they wanted or needed one. And the people responded to this mature sixteen year old that seemed so gentle.

Finally, she let them know that they could always ask for help, and it would be provided. And encouraged them to ask questions whenever they wanted – allowing for the fact that there was a time difference between most of the countries and Western America, and that they might not reach her directly because of it. And, in ones and twos, they left under their own power for their home or to check out the rest of Enclave. And finally, Muriel was alone and able to go back to her office.

"How'd it go?" asked Mata.

"Well. Well, pretty well. There a handful of them that haven't really gotten it, yet. But I think they will," Muriel replied. "Once they get in and get their hands dirty having to take care of some problem, I think they'll find their own way of dealing with problems."

"Well," Mata said, "I think ours are just starting," and pointed out the window. Up the

street came six men, dressed in business suits and carrying briefcases.

::Alice,:: Muriel sent, ::could you come here, please. It looks like we've got some lawyers headed toward my office.:: Alice immediately appeared behind Muriel. "Let's go to my office. Mata, show them in when they get here, please," Muriel said.

And, so it came to pass that six men entered the office, after being claimed as the newest victims of the whoosh doors. And yea, verily, they did accost Mata with orders to, "Take us to your leader!"

And Mata laughed, and said, "Right! Do you want fries with that? Oh, Muriel! This is going to be fun," she said as she led them into the casual area, and Muriel laughed. Unbeknownst to the men, they were followed by three members of squad one. It wasn't until they were seated that they saw the wall of three Envoys across the entrance to the area. Mata sat on the other side of Muriel from Alice.

"Gentlemen? Why are you here?" asked Muriel.

"Silence, girl! We're here to speak to your leader!"

"Yep, Mata, this WILL be fun." Looking at one of her squad members she asked, "Anything?"

"Papers, coated with something. Give us a second." After about a minute, he added, "OK, it's neutralized. It was a powder that could act either as an airborne or contact poison. We've got it stored up, in case they want it back," he said, grinning.

"Oh, now, that's just nasty. Are you implying that they were on a suicide mission?" Muriel said.

"Probably not of their own volition," the Envoy replied. "But they may not want to go back to whoever sent them and tell them that they failed."

"WHAT! What is this?" one of the men said, and Muriel took him to be the leader of the group.

"Well, basically," Muriel said, "I'd say it's what it looks like. A failed attempt to kill me. My name is Muriel, and I'm the Ambassador to earth and the Leader of Home. And you haven't started off very well by ordering me to be silent, since I'm the one you wanted to talk to. Now, state your business. And start by telling me who you represent."

"You would not understand . . .," the man said.

"Why?" interrupted Muriel. "Because I'm a woman? A girl? Look at the wall up there. I probably hold more PhDs than you do, and in more diverse subjects. I've been collecting them since I was twelve. Stop the nonsense and start talking."

"You're hurting America!" another one said. "You're destroying the economy and causing companies to fail. People are walking off their jobs – refusing to work any more."

"Uh, huh. So, you represent these companies that are failing," Muriel said.

"NO!" the first replied. "We're simply concerned about what's happening in America and how it's harming the country."

"Is it? Is it really harming the country? Or just one small segment of it. People can now make their own clothes, make their own food, fix up their homes so that they're safe," Muriel said. "Have you looked at the economy of China, and how it's changed? There are still businesses, but their foundation is different. There's still a money based economy, but it's one that is only a minor segment of the population's life – it's only purpose is to interact with other countries where it absolutely NEEDS to interact with their economy. People have power to operate equipment, clean water, sewage and garbage disposal that actually works and doesn't pollute the earth any more. The air is being cleaned up. People no longer get ill, for the most part. And those that do are quickly cured. People are able to travel, again. The level of education is going up, dramatically. And the same thing is happening here."

"But, it's unnatural," the man exclaimed. "It's destroying businesses, and causing governments to no longer be responsive to the needs of the country!"

"Uh, huh. I see. Life is change. You want to make it static, which means death. Throughout history, there have been changes that have made a significant impact on the way things were done. And at each step the people at the top of society have complained that it was wrong because it was different," Muriel said. "Kings have been forced to acknowledge that they weren't all powerful – they were controlled by the lower ranking nobles to the point of becoming figureheads because of the excesses of those royalty. The industrial revolution took what had been cottage industries and absorbed them into larger businesses, forcing people to change from agriculture to what amounted to slave labor in factories. And those gave way, eventually, to reforms in child labor and safety standards. And at each level, the ones that controlled the money and the jobs complained."

"Religions changed. They no longer controlled every aspect of individual lives, and THEY complained that it wasn't natural," Muriel said. Then added, "And those religions were STILL trying to control the people through guilt and fear right up to a few months ago, when I pretty much laid down the law. Governments changed, and were forced to become more responsive to the needs of the people – the working class people that actually BUILT the economy. And people complained that it wasn't natural – always the people at the top that had been accumulating the money and had the most to lose."

"But it isn't!" the man said. "Can't you understand? Without economy – without money – the world will be reduced to barbarism in very short order."

"Really?" asked Muriel. "I doubt it. What I see is people being freed from the enslavement caused by a few greedy people. Financial enslavement. Religious enslavement. Political enslavement. People are no longer dependent on having a low paying

job just to be able to barely live. No longer chained by outmoded mythology that creates fear and guilt. No longer subject to being controlled by 'powerful' people."

"But," he said, "it's all just a fantasy! NO ONE can live like that!"

"Really? There's a whole country doing very nicely that way," Muriel said. "And have you noticed how crime is down? That people are no longer being killed at the rate that they had been? That homes and businesses are no longer being broken into and robbed at the rate they had been? That drug abuse is down, because the supply is no longer there and the desperate need to forget is gone? All manner of violent crime is down. So are fires. So are hospital admissions. Wars are fading into history because people are no longer being lied to by their own governments. This has been going on for four years, now, and people like you have tried to stop me – tried to kill me – during all that time. After a while, it tends to get boring. It's so predictable. And now, you're going to lay some sort of ultimatum on me that you can't back up. One which, if you only took a look, you'd realize that you can't enforce."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, young lady. However, it changes nothing. You need to get your leader in here, now, so that he can understand that this farce has ended," the man said. "This property will be taken over for the good of the people, and you WILL be evicted. Nor will you be allowed to purchase property anywhere in the United States or it's territories."

"You really don't get it, do you. I AM the Leader of Home. You've been talking to the highest authority there is," Muriel said. "I can't help it if you are unable or unwilling to admit that women have the capability of leadership. I can't force you to recognize that I am the Leader of Home. But I can enforce the rules of Home in this sovereign Embassy. You have made vague allegations, and refused to identify yourself or who you represent. And now, you've made unspecified threats, which is breaking the peace of Home. Therefore, you will be taken to a secure location and held until such time as you choose to acknowledge the rights and privileges of this Embassy of Home as specified and acknowledged in the Treaty Home holds with the United States of America. Bob, will you escort these persons to the warehouse prison and see that they're processed."

"Sure, Muriel," he said, translating in. "Come along, gentlemen." And the men were gathered up by one of Bob's squads, and translated out.

"Muriel," Alice said. "They're trying to take the property in eminent domain. I gather from the documents they had in their briefcases, that they're trying to get it 'for the good of the economy'. That's been shut down, before, by the Supreme Court, after that fiasco in Connecticut where the government tried to take property to hand over to a drug manufacturer. It was also tried here, in Arizona, when the government tried to take land to turn over to a developer to make a shopping mall. Both times it was shut down. The last one was by the State Supreme Court. One of my secretaries is looking up who is doing this, and under what legislation. We'll get it taken care of."

"How'd you find out?" asked Muriel.

"Oh, your squad members, when they made the papers safe, read them and passed

the information on to me. They were half-tempted to just blank the pages, too, but I told them not to. Hope you don't mind," Alice said.

"No, that would have just opened up another whole can of worms," Muriel said, laughing. "Though I'd love to see what the papers said. Better to just leave it to you and let you handle it. You can tell me the details when it's all over."

"Oh, good! You're learning to let me do my job," Alice said, grinning. "'Bout time, girl. It's only taken four years."

"Oh, pish! And likewise tush! I've always let you do your job. After all, you can't expect me to bother with boring legalities," Muriel quipped back, and they both laughed.

"I'll get out of here and let you get back to loafing," Alice said, and quickly translated out.

Chapter 37

What Comes Around Gets Squashed like a Bug

(Thursday morning)

"Miss," the young man said to Mata, "would it be possible for me to see the Ambassador?"

"As soon as she comes down," Mata replied. "That shouldn't be long. She's having breakfast. Can we get you coffee or something while you wait?" she said, leading him to Muriel's casual area.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to put you to any work," he said.

"It's not a problem. You're one of the new Ambassadors, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Just Mata. I'm just an Envoy and her security chief. Nobody special," Mata grinned.

"Now, you sound like her," he said. "She's always saying things like that. I'm sorry, it's all still so new to me."

"Understandable. Muriel DOES trot out the titles, sometimes. But, usually only when somebody is being officious and difficult," Mata said. "Most of the Ambassadors have adopted that attitude. And really," she added, "I think it's a good one. Titles get in the way of just plain talk and dealing with problems. They create a whole other level of problems. So, she only uses them to cut through the attempted bullying of idiots that can't get it through their head that they're talking to the head of a whole other world."

"You don't have a last name . . . do you?" he asked.

"No. I'm an Envoy. We differentiate based on who we're thinking about. Besides, what you know as a name is just something we put on for humans. You can't pronounce our real names. Even we can't, in human form," Mata replied.

"But Muriel doesn't have one!" he said.

"Oh, sure she does. And she even uses it sometimes. Just not very often. Ask her," Mata said.

"Ask me what?" asked Muriel as she translated in.

"About your last name," Mata said.

"Oh. White. Heck, you could have seen that on the diplomas on the wall," Muriel said.

"I don't use it as Ambassador, true. Partly because as Ambassador, I want people to be able to approach me and talk to me. Not be intimidated by my title. But, I've found, over the years, that when I DO use just my first name WITH the titles, it's even more intimidating to people. Or," she suddenly asked, "are you asking if I'm human? I am. My parents live just a few blocks away. So . . . what can I do for you?"

"Oh . . . well . . . I was wondering if I HAD to use just one name," he said.

"Nope. Your choice. You know the society you live in, and how people will react," Muriel said, smiling. "In fact, there's a number of Ambassadors that use their full names officially. One of them is in Russia. Mostly, she's simply known as Anna. But on official documents she uses Anastasiya Khmelnytsky. It scares the hell out of Russians, because it's so obviously a Cossack name. And she loves giving people that effect. Me, on the other hand, had no idea where this job would take me, and I didn't consider myself something special. So, I just said my name was Muriel. And shortly after, I ended up using my title to shock people that thought they could walk all over me. Usually just before they were arrested," she said, grinning. "But my original documents," she said, pulling out her Home and American passports, "show my full name. So, really, it's up to you, and what you feel comfortable with."

"Oh! OK, that makes sense," he said.

"Yep. And, really, that's the way you're going to have to deal with any situation," she added. "I can't very well tell you how to behave in specific situations, because I don't know what those situations could be. And, really, neither do you until it jumps up and bites you in the butt." And he laughed. "You're going to have to make decisions on the fly, and MAYBE they'll end up becoming your 'Ambassador' persona – the way you normally interact with people. And if you make mistakes at first, or have problems, you can always holler for help."

"Can I tell this to others?"

"Of course!" she said, positively. "There's nothing secret about it. And, as you just found out, we welcome questions. It helps both of us. Depending on circumstances, it may not be me that answers the questions. I may be otherwise engaged. But you WILL get answers, and ones that I'll back. In fact, you can probably just ask your Envoy security chief. He'll know, because all the Envoys know."

"Oh, thank you. I was so worried about how to behave with important people," he said.

"Oh, that's an easy one. As an Ambassador for another world, you rank the same as the leader of a country. You're an Ambassador Plenipotentiary, which means that we back you. We trust you to know the situation, and give you the authority to deal with it," she said.

"OH! Oh, my. Yes, I must tell my friends about this. I mean, the ones I met yesterday. We weren't sure where we stood, and this clears it up a lot," he said. "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"No problem," she managed to say before he translated out.

"Well! That was easy. I hope they're all like that," Muriel said.

"Oops. Don't count on it," Mata said, as Taylor translated into the office.

"Hi, Taylor," Muriel said. "What's up? And don't say the sky."

"We're being evicted! They say that a foreign national can't own property in Britain!"

"Whoa, slow down. First, you're NOT a foreign national. You're a citizen. And so am I, come to that," Muriel said. "Your grandmother made sure of that, for her own reasons. But even more important, look at the companies that are pushing this, and I think you'll find that THEY are foreign nationals. If they REALLY want to follow through on this, then they'd have to leave the country, too. Get your lawyers on it. Suggest that point, if they don't think about it."

"How'd you know? I mean," Taylor said, "how'd you know it was companies doing it?"

"Because we've got a bunch of people in the warehouse prison, right now," Muriel said, "that have tried the same sort of thing on us. Only they're using eminent domain. And I've been facing this sort of fight for longer than you have. In fact, I think I'll put it up on the mesh mind, so that other Ambassadors are aware of how to deal with it."

"Muriel," Anna said, translating in. "Oh, hi, Taylor. Muriel, I pulled a nasty. Some companies tried to get Enclave declared property of Russia, and I sicced Sergei on them. The companies now have a week to leave the country. Leaving all their assets behind."

"GOOD FOR YOU!" Muriel exclaimed. "Perfect. Hit them with the same thing that they tried to hit you with. I wonder if we can pull something like that in this country."

"You, too?" asked Anna.

"Yea, but they're trying to do it under eminent domain," Muriel said. "It doesn't stand a chance. Oh, Taylor, I forgot to say, have your lawyers throw the Treaty at them, too. They're basically Treaty busting."

"Geez! And I thought you'd be mad at me for using Sergei to field it," Anna said.

"Nope. Use whatever tools you have. And, since you cleaned up the Russian Parliament, the companies didn't have the political clout to make it stick," Muriel said. "I'd say that was a very good use of Sergei."

"Muriel," Alice said, coming into the office. "Oh, I'm sorry. Was I interrupting something?"

"Nope. Just friends. What's up?" Muriel asked.

"The Treaty idea worked. That threw it out of the local court into Federal court. And that shot it down. The Treaty is very clear that Enclave is untouchable," Alice said. "You can turn those people loose any time you feel is appropriate."

"Not until I have notarized hard copies I can give them to take back to their handlers," Muriel said.

"Handlers? That makes them sound like spies, or something," Alice said.

"Well, owners then," Muriel said, grinning. "This isn't something that they did. It's something that they were TOLD to do. Are charges being leveled against the companies that tried to pull off this stunt?"

"I don't know yet. I'll try to find out, but it might take awhile. I KNOW we won't get the written decision from the court for at least a week," Alice said.

"That's OK," Muriel replied. "They're not going anywhere. And they're not being mistreated. In fact, the vacation might do them some good."

"Muriel," Alice said, "you're a nasty, nasty girl."

"I know," Muriel matter-of-factly replied. "But it's so much fun." And they both laughed.

"So, what's with these two?" asked Alice.

"Same song, different verse. In fact," Muriel said, "I'm wondering . . ."

"Yep," interrupted Mata. "Same companies. Or ones linked to the ones, here. They're in trouble, and not just in these three countries. Reports are coming into the on-duty squad from all the Enclaves. So far, the Treaties are holding up. Taylor, you might want to let your father know to tell your grandmother. I'm sure the Queen would appreciate knowing what companies are involved."

"Already done, while Muriel and Alice were talking, Mata. Thanks," he said. "My father says that he'll be bringing in the heads of the companies to, as he says, 'help them understand that the Crown will be very displeased if she has to lose such companies because they've engaged in trying to break the Treaty that Britain has with Home'. They will be given a choice of either canceling the action or leaving the country WITHOUT their assets within twenty-four hours."

"Yep, that ought to do it," Muriel said, as Mata laughed. "I take it that Her Majesty wasn't amused."

"Not hardly!" Taylor said, grinning. "And my father says that this is the most fun he's had in a long time. These are the same companies that have been trying to agitate Parliament into revoking the Treaty and have been trying to get laws passed that would give

them more control over what products can be sold in Britain. Meaning only theirs. What he's not going to tell them is that the CEOs of the companies will be up on charges if they don't comply within the time frame."

"Can he do that?" asked Muriel.

"He seems to feel he can, just from the fact that they are a registered company in the country, and are supposed to follow our laws," Taylor said. "That means honoring agreements that Parliament and the Crown have made regarding other nations. That includes Home. To act against the good of Britain, regardless of the origin of the country or the CEO, could be considered a criminal offense, about equal to that of a spy trying to create dissension in the country."

"Ouch! But what's that going to do to the workers?" asked Muriel. "Or those that rely on their products?"

"Oh, well, that's why their assets would have to remain in place. I believe it's called 'nationalizing' a company," Taylor said.

"Hey! I've got to get back," Anna suddenly said. "My mother's got dinner ready. See you later." And she translated out.

"Yep, and I need to get back to work," Alice said, and likewise translated out.

"Um . . .," Taylor began.

"You might as well just tell me," Muriel said.

"I was wondering if you'd be willing to go to a polo match with me," he said.

"I might. When? Not today, I hope!" she said.

"NO! Oh, no. Saturday afternoon. Well . . . morning, here. It would be outdoors, of course. It might be cool, so bring a blanket and a chair," he said.

"Don't need to. Just make them on the spot. No sense carrying things we don't have to carry. Same with water or other beverages. Or umbrellas. I've heard about your weather," she grinned. "We can just put up shields to keep the rain off."

"OH! Yes, of course," he said.

"What's that thing you do during half time?" Muriel innocently asked.

"What? Oh, stomping the divots? Well, you don't have to if you don't want to," he said.

"I was just thinking that we could do it easier and more effectively. And without stomping," Muriel said.

“What? How?”

“Just tip them into the holes and press, using shields. No stomping necessary. Oh, and we can remove the land-mines, too,” she added.

“Land-mines?”

“Yea. Or are your horses abnormal?” she asked, and he busted up laughing.

“Yea, we could do that. I’ve just . . . I’ve never used the training for just ordinary things,” he said.

“Then it’s time you did. Wear your greens, with the cocky hat.”

“Muriel? What are you doing?” Taylor asked.

“Being normal. We’ve BEEN outrageous,” she said. “It’s time they saw us in our normal phase. Friends, sharing a couple of hours. In fact, if we each bring a squad, we can finish the field in short order. You and I walking side by side, with the squads stretched out to either side. Set it up with the announcer, so people will know what’s happening. And we’ll just go along, goofing and kidding like normal people. But replacing the divots the easy way.”

“Muriel, you’re showing off, again.”

“Of course. But by understating it. We’ll just be two normal people, that have jobs that we’re taking time away from to watch a match,” she said. “Except we won’t have to carry things, and won’t get wet, and can fix the field in record time. So, you can be ‘just an ordinary guy’.”

“Uh, huh. And I heard that quote. So that makes you my fair lady,” he said with a bit of a giggle.

“NOW you’ve got it. You’ve got a whole country that can do things like this, now. Well, at least about seventy percent of them can. So, it’s time to show your true colors,” Muriel said.

“Well, OK . . . I guess. So, you want me to pick you up, Saturday?” he asked.

“Sure. What time?”

“About three? I mean, three MY time,” he said.

“OK, that would be . . . um . . . about eight o’clock my time. Sure. No problem. See you then,” she said. And he quickly translated out.

Chapter 38

Horsing Around (Saturday morning)

Well, Taylor didn't show up at eight o'clock, as Muriel expected. It was more like seven thirty. And fortunately, she'd just finished breakfast.

"GREENS, boy! Get them on," Muriel said. "We're going in with squads."

"Do you really think this is wise, Muriel?"

"If I didn't think it was wise, I wouldn't do it," she replied. "It's time that people saw us as we really are when we're relaxed and just being us. Or is it that you're so out of practice that you can't do common, ordinary things with the training?"

"No, no. I can do them. It's just that I've been so long trying not to startle people that it seems strange to me," he said.

"Yep. I can understand that. But there's more people trained than there are untrained," she said. "So, it's time we showed them that they really CAN use the training for ordinary things."

"But why the squads?"

"Well, I don't know about you, but I still have people trying to kill me," Muriel said. "I think it must have been something I said. Or maybe did. I don't know. But I do know that it helps to have a squad handy to apprehend the malefactors. Besides, they'll come in handy for re-dressing the field at half-time. And that, too, will show people that the training comes in handy."

"I'm not going to win this one, am I," he finally said.

"Nope."

"OK, I'll call a squad," he said.

"And a security chief," Muriel added. "Mata's going with me. She needs a break. She didn't tell me what she wants to break, but she needs it. So, I'm giving it to her." And Mata's screen needed cleaning, again. "Mata, squad three, I think. I don't take them out as often as squad two. Might do them some good to pick up horse manure, instead of just loafing around the break room."

"Yea," Mata said. "Then they can REALLY say 'this job stinks'." And Muriel sputtered, then busted out laughing.

"You're just trying to pay me back for all the ones I pull on you," Muriel said.

"Of course. Trouble is, I can't catch you at your computer with a mouthful of something," Mata replied.

"I'll work on that for you. Let me know when you've got a zinger, and I'll try to set it up for you," Muriel said. Mata just glared at her.

"You DO know that that's as bad as wanting twenty-four hours notice of any emergency, don't you?" Mata growled out.

"Well . . . I can WANT it. Getting it, however, is another matter," Muriel grinned at Mata, then turned to Taylor. "Shall we go?"

"Yea, I think we'd better. Hmm. Rather crowded. I didn't expect crowds this early," he sent the image to Muriel. "Suggestions?"

"Yep. Same one we pulled at your school, four years ago. Come in from above, make a hole, and go on from there," Muriel said. "You want to do it? Or do you want me to?"

"I think I'd better. You tend to get outrageous. Let's see if I can open a space without all the yelling." He concentrated for a couple of seconds, then he and Muriel and the two squads translated to a cleared area not far from the entrance.

"Not bad. Create a small shield and expand it to cause the crowd to open up," Muriel said. "Then translate into the space. Lead on. You know where you're going." ::Mata, something doesn't seem right. Would you take the squad and go stealth, please, and look around.::

::On it. I think I see what you're picking up on. Warn Taylor,:: Mata sent back.

::Taylor, something about this crowd doesn't seem right. You might want to scatter your people through the crowd to see what's going on,:: Muriel sent. ::This isn't just any polo match, is it. It's something you set up?::

::Yes. For charity. Why?:: he asked.

::Because this isn't a crowd. It's a mob. Just glancing around us, I can see five people that have things that can be used as clubs,:: she sent back. ::I've got my squad in stealth looking to see if they can find out anything. The images I'm getting from them are showing the same sort of thing.::

::Hmm. Yea, I see what you mean. Canes have been used as clubs before. And the people holding these certainly don't need them. They're carrying them rather than using them. And awkwardly, as if they didn't know HOW to use them as canes. One of my people has just noticed that a number of them have bags of caltrops, too. The ONLY thing they're used for is to disable horses. Muriel, I think I'm going to need help, here,:: he finally sent.

::You got it. I've got my other three squads here, turning caltrops into popcorn. And the clubs are turning into something like those stupid 'swim noodle' tubes that kids play with in pools. They're also trying to 'urge' the ones carrying them into one mass that would better be contained. They won't know it, but they'll be in a shield to keep them from breaking back out and causing trouble.::

::OK, I've got Sid bringing three more squads. I suggest that we keep them contained until after the match and the normal crowd leaves, then question them,:: Taylor sent.

::Sounds good. I've also asked for help from Home to contain the mob. That way we can go on as planned during half-time. You've got media, here, don't you?::

::Yep. They'd have been here, anyway. Any time a Royal does something for charity, it seems to be de rigueur. It's the appropriate thing to do, dontchaknow,:: he added, in a fake upper class 'voice'. ::This is to raise funds for a children's hospital. They need some new equipment.::

They made their way through the crowd, their uniforms causing something of a stir as they found places to sit where they'd be out of the way but highly visible. Muriel kept her mental ear open for updates on what her squads were doing while watching the proceedings. She also asked lots of questions about the match, this being the first time she'd ever seen polo played. She learned two things right off the bat. First, that it took a great deal of training and stamina to be a rider. And second, that it took a toll on horses, and they were swapped out regularly to keep them from overexerting themselves and causing injuries as a result.

Half-time came, and the announcement was made that the Prince and Duchess, assisted by security squads that each had brought with them, would be 'stamping the divots'. Muriel and Taylor lined up at one end of the field – their squads ranged out from either side of them – and proceeded to casually walk toward the other end. That casual walk resulted in divots flying into holes made by the horses hooves, and being pressed into place. It also resulted in the elimination of horsey byproduct that had a certain 'air' about it. As they walked, Muriel and Taylor engaged in some general goofing around. The impression was of two people that were good enough friends that they were comfortable with each other, and were just out for a lark.

As they headed back to their places, Muriel took Taylor's arm, and casually waved at the cheering crowd. The display had been visible enough that the crowd realized that it had been done without anyone physically touching the divots. The smiling, laughing, joking couple resumed their location without incident, as Mata updated Muriel on what had been done.

Taylor sent to her that his squads had been going through the crowd, creating bottles of water for those that didn't have the training to make them for themselves. They also handed out hats, similar to the ones they wore, especially to kids in the crowd, though adults that had neglected that essential item were also offered them. In general, they were acting as ambassadors of good will while making sure that the crowd knew they were there in case of

trouble. Sid, for maybe the first time since he'd first joined the military, was having the time of his life just kidding with people and seeing to their comfort.

The second half went off without a hitch, unless you count the kids that 'just happened' to wander over and ask for an autograph. Muriel found it interesting that more girls than boys seemed to come to her first, while Taylor had more boys than girls. They also handed out hats – pale copies of the ones they wore. Muriel even put the Home logo on the front, but not the three dimensional one used to actually denote Home in an official capacity. They also were the 'one size fits all' type, with a strap in the back to adjust the fit.

When the crowd left, after the match, Muriel and Taylor walked over to where the mob was being confined. “Well folks,” Taylor said, “I hope you enjoyed the game. I do have one question, though. Why bring weapons to a charity event? And caltrops. Nasty things. So, why?”

“Yea? What gives you the right to have the training and not let us have it?” one loud mouth shouted.

“Well, that's direct,” Taylor said. “The fact is that we'll train anyone that CAN be trained. Most of this crowd, here today, was trained. But people that are bullies or want to use force to make themselves 'better' than others just aren't able to be trained. Your own greed for power or position is what has kept you from being trained. And now, I'm afraid, it's cost you your freedom, too. We can't have people going around threatening and hurting other people at what's meant to be a happy event, now, can we?”

“Oh, yea?” the loud mouth said. “Well, there's more of us than you think. And we won't put up with it any more. We demand our rights!”

“Oh, you'll get your rights,” Taylor said. “The police are very scrupulous about such things. Ah! Here are the buses, now. So, I'll just leave you to their tender mercies, shall I? Then you can get in contact with whoever sent you and let them know that you were unsuccessful in disrupting this match and demanding things that definitely AREN'T part of your rights. Go along, now.”

And slowly the mob was relieved of the weapons that had been returned to them, and herded onto the buses. Taylor's squads gathered near him, and Muriel's near her as the last of the mob was sorted out. ALL of the squads, and Sid and Mata, were grinning.

“Do you realize,” one of Taylor's squad members said, “that people – well mostly children – were asking for OUR autographs? Simply because we were handing out water and hats! Astounding!”

“Not really,” Muriel said. “You were being 'real people', not faceless troops. You were kidding with them, and helping them to be comfortable with the fact that you were just doing a job that needed to be done. And it was VERY well done. In fact, it looked like a contest was going on between you 'Jolly Greens' and my squads, as to who could pass out the most hats,” she added, laughing.

"Well, we tried to not let it show," Mata said. "But in a sense, you're right. But only in a sense. We'd try to alert Taylor's people to kids – or even adults – that wanted the hats like the Home Regiment wore. And they did the same for us for those that wanted hats like yours. The contest was more 'how many of which gender wanted what hat'."

"And? What did you find out?" asked Muriel.

"That more girls wanted hats than boys did. That more Home Regiment hats were handed out than yours, which we actually expected. After all, this IS Britain, and where the Home Regiment is housed. That more boys took hats like yours than girls did, because they thought they looked cool. We checked, later, and found out that the cagey little buggers then turned around and got a Home Regiment hat, too," Mata said, grinning.

"Some of the girls did the same," Sid said from behind her. "Hey, no problem. They want them, they were easy enough to make. And it made them happy. So, why not?"

"OK, so now for the real question. How many of those children had at least some of the training?" asked Muriel.

"ALL of them," Sid said. "At least of those my people saw. How about you, Mata?"

"We got some kids that wanted hats but hadn't been trained. They were looking longingly, but wouldn't speak up," Mata said. "But, if one of us went to them and offered a hat, they'd happily take it. The parents weren't trained, either. Oh, and some of them spotted the difference between us and humans, so we had to explain why the difference. I hope you don't mind, Sid, but some of those kids wanted Home Regiment hats, so we made them for them."

"Like I said. No problem. We were there to help out and make people happy," he said. "And it was fun! The look on kids faces when we'd make a hat right in front of them, and made sure it fitted . . . well . . . I don't think I've ever had so much fun."

"Noted," Taylor immediately said. "I'll have to see about taking you with me more often. Plus a rotating squad of troops. Heck, I thought I'd be imposing on you people by having you do that. It was certainly a lot of work for you."

"No, sir, it wasn't. We train harder than that, and a lot of jobs we do are more difficult," Sid said. "I think maybe you thought that we'd feel it was beneath us. But sir, all the squads feel the same way. It was pure joy to watch kids faces light up. And to think that it started by accident. We were handing out hats to people that didn't have any. And today's sun was fierce. Then one of the squad members noted a kid looking longingly at the hat his father had. And that did it. Mata picked up on it, too, so we had one squad each doing nothing but handing out hats to kids. And Mata and I led them."

"Well, congratulations to both of you. And to your squad member that picked up on the child wanting a hat," Muriel said. "You helped turn just another day following mommy and daddy into something special for them."

"Yes. Give me the name of the squad member, and I'll see that he's given a certificate and a day off for his quick thinking," Taylor said. "I believe in rewarding people that show initiative in ways that are beneficial to the Regiment or the country."

"Thank you, sir. I'll be sure to let you know," Sid said.

"Well," Muriel said, "do we need to dress up the field again before we leave?"

"It would probably help," Taylor said. "But we can handle it. You don't need to stay."

"Four squads plus the leader and security chief should be able to replace the divots," Mata said. "Then, if you'll allow, we'll come along behind and make them an integral part of the whole field. It should go faster with all these people to do it, and the field will be the better for it. Muriel, why don't you go with Taylor."

"Keeping secrets?" asked Muriel.

"OH! Nothing like that. Just that it means juggling a bunch of things to do it right. I can show you on some of the lawns in Enclave, where we've got the time to do the training right," Mata said. "Once you've caught the trick of it, it's no more difficult than creating clothes."

And so it went. Taylor and Muriel lead out Taylor's squads, and were followed at some distance by Mata and Muriel's squads. As Muriel reached the end of the field, she turned around and looked at that Mata was doing. Then, she realized just why Mata didn't want to try to train her on the field. What had been a bit scruffy grass was suddenly lush and green, and just the right length. Mata wasn't just fixing the field. She and the squads were literally replacing the grass and the ground it grew in with new grass and the type of earth it needed to flourish. And the act was a tour de force of effort that truly shocked Muriel. She didn't know it was even possible to do that.

"Muriel," Taylor said, when Mata had caught up with them. "May I walk you home?"

Muriel sputtered a laugh. "Yea, all of one step. But sure, if you'd like to. I'll even treat you to coffee. Or tea, for that matter. You've got to have missed yours setting this event up. Let's go!" And they translated out.

Chapter 39

More Horsing Around, but Without Horses (Saturday morning, afternoon)

They translated to the front of Muriel's office, laughing over Muriel's quip about how long a walk home it would be. And that's when it started. 'Like all boys' – yea, right. That's a lie right off the bat – Taylor decided that the best way to attract Muriel's attention was to attack her. In this case with a snowball. Now, the Valley of the Sun doesn't usually get snow. And I can say with complete confidence that in the middle of summer is definitely not the time for snow. However, CREATING it is another matter. So, he created a soft snowball, and lobbed it at her face.

And the war was on. Muriel immediately retaliated, once she realized that it was snow. And suddenly they were fifty feet in the air, dodging and throwing with amazing precision. And only missing because the other's reflexes were honed by other tasks. Like the 'air hockey' game that Muriel and her friends had come up with.

Ted saw Mata standing outside Muriel's office, looking up and laughing. "What's up?" he asked.

"Your darling original trainee and her suitor," Mata replied. "Their engaging in normal teenage courtship ritual. A snowball fight." And Ted looked up, and started laughing.

"That's got to be the fastest snowball fight in history. And the most remarkable," he said.

"Yep. And I wouldn't stop it for anything. They're both laughing, so I don't think there's a serious problem with letting it continue for a bit," Mata said. "Besides, it'll work off some of the excess energy and hormones."

The fight ended suddenly with Taylor throwing a snowball at Muriel. Instead of dodging to the side, she dove under it and came up directly in front of him with a handful of snow which she promptly deposited on his face. He grabbed her and eliminated the offending material. And kissed her.

"Inside! Fast!" Mata said. "And don't say a word about this unless SHE mentions it.

And in the air, a shocked Muriel just looked at Taylor, stunned. "Muriel . . .," he started.

"If you apologize, then I'll plant my knee in the most painful way I can, right between your legs. Then send you back to your grandmother and you can explain to HER why you're doubled over in pain and retching," she said in a calm, quiet voice and with a small smile on her face. "Let's get down. I still owe you tea. And I could probably use a snack, myself." Muriel immediately descended, and a very puzzled Taylor followed her.

Inside her office, Mata looked up and said, "Chuck should have something for you two, shortly. Tea, Taylor?" she asked.

"Yes, please."

"Muriel? Coffee?"

"I think so. And something to snack on. It's been a long morning," Muriel replied. And the two made their way into the casual area and found seats. Chuck came in, shortly after with Taylor's tea and an assortment of sweets. One of his squad members came in with Muriel's coffee, and indicated that she could share the sweets on the coffee table.

Ted, who had elected to 'go inside' to Muriel's casual area and take up residence in his usual seat, looked at Muriel and said, "So . . . how was the match?"

And Muriel blushed bright red. Taylor fielded the question by saying, "I thought it went pretty well. Both my troops and Muriel's squads handed out hats to the kids and some of the spectators that didn't have one. Oh, and we stopped what could have been a violent demonstration by some bully-boys. They were armed with blackthorn canes and caltrops, of all things. That last would have done serious damage to the horses."

Muriel, who had finally managed to get herself under control, added, "Yes, I thought it was pretty good. Definitely raised some money for the hospital. And it didn't do our image any harm to show that we were just ordinary people that wanted to help. Especially when it involved kids."

"Well Good!" Ted said, having noticed the blush, and Taylor's quick response to save Muriel's pride. "So, you enjoyed yourselves, then?" And Muriel blushed again. And Mata sent Ted a look with black tinged eyes that suggested that he lay off the innuendos.

"Oh, yes," Taylor said, "especially the end." And Muriel blushed again. "Muriel suggested repairing the field. Well, we certainly did that. Mata and the squads created better ground and improved the grass. Instead of the scruffy grass that had been there, it's now lush and green. And, if I read what Mata did correctly, it'll stay that way. It's normally a park, and now people will have a wonderful place to play or just lay around. Really! Quite an achievement."

"Well! . . . ," Ted said. "I think I'd better get out of here and back to work." And quickly left.

"Um . . . Muriel? Can I talk to you for a minute?" asked Taylor.

"Sure! What do you need?" she replied.

"I . . . um . . . I really don't know how to say this"

"Look. We're both going through a lot," she said. "It's easiest if you just come out and

say things, and we'll sort them out. Otherwise, we end up dancing around subjects and that allows for confusion and misunderstandings. So, just say it."

"OK. Um . . . look, what happened at the end of the snowball fight. I mean . . .," he said, and stood up.

"I meant what I said. No apology. If I'd been upset you'd have been pushed away or slapped, or something. Did I like being kissed? Of course," she said. "Does it mean anything? I don't know. I don't know that I want it to. I also don't know if I DON'T want it to. I'm as confused as you are, at the moment. So, we just go on. Maybe in time it WILL mean something. To both of us. But it's too early to tell. I meant what I said, earlier, about taking our time. Look, we both need to mature some. That's not an offense. Just a statement of fact. You've got some growing to do, and I don't know whether what you become – the adult you – will be someone that I want to spend my life with. And the same goes the other way. I don't know what I'm going to be like as an adult, and whether I'll be someone that YOU'LL want to spend your life with. All we can do is let it run."

"And the kiss," she said, softly and going to him, "yes, I enjoyed it. It surprised me. But it didn't offend me." And she proved it by kissing him, gently. "OK? Do you understand, now?"

"I think so," he said, red faced. "You're saying that this isn't a 'for always'. Just that, right now, you like me enough that a kiss is just a kiss."

"Close. If you realize that a kiss is an expression of how much a person likes another person." THAT caused him to straighten up, some. Then she went on, "But even friends can kiss. It doesn't really change the level that we're at – doesn't take it to a new level. Yet. Be patient. Work on who you are, and what you are, and how you deal with other people. Work on becoming the adult you want to become. And I'll do the same. And we'll see where it goes from there, as time goes by. OK?"

"OK. Now I understand. You're not closing me out. You're not taking me in. You're just taking things one step at a time so we can both be sure of who we are and who each other are."

"Yea. Something like that. And there's also some other things. Our jobs. Our relationships to other, outside, influences and how we'll deal with them. Lots of stuff that we've only begun to explore," she said. "If we weren't who we are and in the positions we're in, it would be so much simpler. But we are who we are, and other people feel we have responsibilities that are beyond those of normal people. That's part of what we need to sort out."

"Yea. I get it. OK – friend – I'll work on it," he said.

"And now, I think you should get back. It'll be your dinner time, soon. And I have things to do, here," she said. Then gave him a quick kiss, and he translated out.

Muriel turned and looked at Mata. "I know you were listening. Hard," she grinned. "So, OK, he kissed me. But you knew that, before. You and Ted, both. And now you know that I kissed him. It still doesn't mean that we're boyfriend and girlfriend, much less anything deeper."

"Yes, ma'am. Muriel, will you take offense if I suggest that you talk with your mother? She might be able to help you sort some of it out," Mata said.

"Why would I take something that's that personal to my mother?" asked Muriel.

"Because, even if you don't believe it, she was young once," Mata said. "She just might have some information that you could use. You only know of two men that she knew when she was younger. One she dropped, and one she married. Do you really think that was it?"

Muriel looked at her. "Do you really think she could help?"

"From what I can tell, girls have been going through this sort of thing for a long time," Mata said. "It's not new. And maybe she can't answer all your questions. But maybe she can help enough that you can answer the rest for yourself. Oh, and I want you to realize that I am NOT advocating any particular answer. I'm just saying that she might be able to help."

"I'm not even sure I know what the question is? Or questions, for that matter," Muriel said.

"Then go upstairs and sort it out," Mata replied with a tired smile. "There's nothing here that absolutely needs you. If I can't handle things, then there's Ted to help me. If all else fails and he can't either, then we'll see about stalling. We'll only disturb you if it's absolutely necessary, to give you the time to do what you do best – analyze the problem. Break it down to what you CAN answer and what you can't. Then ask your mother for her opinion on the parts you can't answer. Girl, I can't help you with this one. No experience with it, remember?" she asked. "But I can point you to directions where you can get answers. To yourself. To your mother. Maybe Sally, but I doubt it. She's still going through this, herself. Go." And Muriel got.

Upstairs, she began trying to put it together. She called up a program onto her main screen in her living room, sat back in her recliner, and tried to sort it all out.

Do I like Taylor? Enough to be involved with him?	Yes. Maybe.
What if we grow apart, and I can't deal with him?	I don't know.
What about his grandmother's plans?	I don't know
What if Taylor is named King?	I don't know
How will I handle being Leader of Home?	I don't know
Where will we live?	I don't know

::Mom? Can I talk to you?:: Muriel sent.

::Of course you can. You're father's out gadding about with friends. I'm in the kitchen,:: Lily replied.

Muriel quickly printed off what was on screen, and translated to her mother. A second later, she was in her arms, and crying.

Chapter 40

Answers, Maybe

(Saturday afternoon, Sunday morning)

"Hey, now. It's not that bad. Honest. We'll find a way, honey. Honest we will," her mother said. "We'll find a way, or make one. Come on. Sit down and tell me about it."

Oh, mom! I don't know what to do!" she cried. "I feel so alone"

"Ah. Testosterone, again," Lily said.

"I don't think that's the only hormone at work, here," Muriel replied.

"Mmm. Yes. The Kiss."

"Oh, GAD! Does everybody know about that?"

"Honey, when you're fifty feet up in the air, throwing snow at each other, then suddenly kissing, it's pretty hard to hide it from about half of Enclave. I think every Envoy in Enclave knows about it. And are cheering. And only about half the humans, but they're cheering, too. They just realized that you really are human, and young, and a girl," Lily said. "And they're not cheering because it's Taylor. They're cheering because you've just reinforced that you ARE human and you've started to take the next steps toward adulthood. You've discovered the complexities of love. Have you tried to sort it out?"

"Yea," Muriel replied, sniffing, then creating a tissue for her eyes and nose. "Yea, but I could only answer one question," she said, and handed her mother the printout.

"Hmm. Yes. I see what you mean," Lily said. "But maybe we can reduce the list a bit. There's only two questions that you've answered honestly. So, lets start from the bottom of the list. You can go anywhere on earth – or Home, for that matter – in an instant. So where you live really doesn't matter. You're not a little girl, any longer, that needs her mother beside her all the time. Heck, you haven't needed me that way in years, now."

"How will you handle being leader of Home? I suspect that you'll handle it the same way you do, now. With flair. By being outrageous. By being you. Then the next one," Lily said. "What if Taylor is named King. Well, what of it. You don't have to be an extension of him. You are you. Just make sure that people – and by that I mean the government as well as everybody else – knows and understands that. That's something you're good at doing. And that takes care of his grandmother's plans, too. She may be Queen, but she doesn't outrank you. YOU set the pattern. Besides, it really isn't up to her, is it?"

"So, that knocks it down to just two questions," Lily said. "And it's the same two questions that every girl has. Well, actually, it adds a few, too. But maybe we can at least give you an idea of what they are, and how to handle them. I DO see why you were so bound

up over this. And really, it's the same problem that every girl has. Guys, too, but they're more flexible with some of it. So, are you ready to answer some serious questions? And would you like somebody else to ask them of?"

"Oh, gad! I'd be to embarrassed to ask anyone else. It's bad enough just talking to you!" Muriel said.

"I know. But I'll tell you the same thing you tell others when you're training them. I won't judge," Lily said. "Really, honestly, I can't. I can guide you in asking questions of yourself. But I can't provide the answers to something that is so personal to you. And answers that might suit me – well, actually, they did suit me – won't necessarily suit you, because you're a different person. You've handled embarrassing talks. Jeff told me about one. Well, actually two. So you know what it's going to be like from my side. So . . . a real mother-daughter thing. We can both be embarrassed, together," she added, smiling. And Muriel laughed, though it was short and a bit strained.

"OK. I'll try. I like Taylor. I like him as a friend. And it's a friendship I'd like to have continue. I don't know if I love him," she said.

"OK, hold it right there. Do you care about him? I don't mean romantically. That comes and goes, and is NOT what love is. I mean do you care about what's important to him?" asked Lily.

"I . . . yes. Enough that I didn't want him making decisions without being himself, first."

"GOOD answer. In its own way. Well, that's what love really is, is caring about another person, and doing what you can to help them," Lily said. "Now, the reason I left romance out of it is because that's pretty much driven by emotions and hormones. It's nice. It's like the icing on the cake. But the cake is the real body of what's needed. Without it, you just have a puddle of icing that quickly melts away."

"By the way, I knew the answer to that one, already," Lily said. "You showed it when you went on that outrageous dinner date. And again this morning when you went with him to the polo match, and made it such a success. Now, we get embarrassing. Do you ever dream about him?" And Muriel immediately blushed. "I'll take that as a yes. And I won't ask about the content of the dreams. I don't need to. You've just answered question number one by eliminating it. You're already involved with him."

"Now, it so happens that I have reason to believe that he cares about you, too. Cares enough to come charging in to defend you against missiles, then go after the ones that tossed them at you," Lily said. "I twitted you about his testosterone, and I shouldn't have. Really. He might have done the first if that was all it was – male showing off. But the second was because he saw a real problem there, and reduced it. So, I don't think you're going to have a problem with that."

"What if it doesn't work?" asked Muriel. "I think that's what really scares me. I don't want to lose him as a friend. But if he goes one way and I go another it could cause some

real clashes that could break us up.”

“And that's the heart of the problem you have. I don't have an answer for you,” Lily said. “I don't, because we're different, and the circumstances are different. I can tell you what I did. But it might not fit your situation. You'll have to figure that out for yourself.”

“So, what did you do?”

“Well, first, I made sure your father and I were friends. The second was that if there was a problem, we'd talk about it, and try to find a solution,” Lily said. “That way, there was no hidden agenda, no festering problems. No surprises. Actually, there was a third thing, but I don't know if it would apply in this day and age. We made a commitment. That was back in the 'age of religion', when words like 'until death do you part' meant something. I won't say it was always easy. But we found a way, because we refused to give up on each other. And really, that's what that silly statement means.”

“Oh.”

“Think you can find out how he feels about those questions?” asked Lily.

“Um. Yea, I think so. Mom? There's something else that scares me,” Muriel said. “Um . . . those dreams. They were kinda”

“Uh, huh. I can understand. And that's perfectly normal, too. When Envoys made the first human bodies, they wanted those bodies to have a reason to want to make MORE human bodies. Oh, and incidentally, to have fun practicing. So . . . it's embarrassing to talk about, but a perfectly normal part of being human,” Lily said. “And there are things you can do to take the fear out of it. And so you can help him, because he'll be just as nervous as you are.”

“MOM!” Muriel exclaimed, blushing harder than she had before.

“Don't you 'mom' me, young lady. You're growing up. And it's the sort of thing that mothers should have been telling their daughters LONG before now,” Lily said. “Yes, it's personal. So is a lot of being a woman. So, we have a lot to still talk about.”

And talk they did. Lily gave Muriel the facts of life. All the juicy bits that mothers leave out of their talk when their daughters first start asking, because 'of course' their daughter would never do things like that. And, at times, BOTH of them were blushing. But, just as the information that Sally had given her, years ago, they kept on until Muriel had a good idea of what was expected of a woman and, for that matter, what was expected of a man. And further, all the things that could go wrong along the way.

Lily went a bit further than that, too. Attitudes of women, at least behind closed doors, had changed since Lily was a girl becoming a woman. And Muriel's mother actually suggested that Muriel make use of some of those things the attitudes produced. Things like rather explicit videos that Muriel hadn't been allowed to view, before. And various 'toys' to

which women of Lily's generation hadn't had access. And this information, coming from her mother, definitely blew Muriel's mind. This was the sort of discussion that she'd NEVER thought to have, especially with her mother. She went back to her apartment with her head buzzing.

"Supper," Chuck said, as she translated in. "Don't think. Just eat. Once I leave, THEN you can think all you like. Oh, your mother's already gotten with Mata, and the restrictions are lifted. Both of them think you're mature enough to deal with whatever you see. Just TRY to remember that you also have a job to do," he added, grinning.

"Yea. That's what worries me now. What's this going to do to me?"

"Hey! I said 'no thinking'. You're a girl, you ought to be able to achieve that," he said.

"YOU FINK! I think all the time. So do a lot of girls. Just because guys don't believe it doesn't mean that we don't," Muriel said, throwing a roll at him that never landed, but was quietly returned to her plate.

"So? Prove it. Stop thinking. Let it settle in. Pass it to your soul, and let IT handle it for a while. Just eat," Chuck said. "Just leave the dishes," he added. "I can deal with them tomorrow when I make your breakfast."

"Chuck . . . do I take advantage of you? I mean, you're always up here cooking for me. Same down in my office."

"Heh. No. I do it because I enjoy doing it," he said. "It isn't like you ignore me or take it for granted. You thank me. You show appreciation of my efforts. Sometimes, going out of your way to thank me for what I've done. No, you're not taking advantage of me. So, leave the dishes. Relax. Let your soul do it's work. I'll make sure that the privacy curtain is in place before I come up, as usual. In fact, you don't even need to get up until I've left, again. I'll try to be quiet and not disturb you." And he translated out, leaving Muriel with a still buzzing head and a growling stomach.

Muriel didn't remember eating, though the empty dishes proved that she had. She'd done what Chuck had suggested, and tossed the information to her soul to sort out. But her soul kept tossing questions and ideas back at her – all in images, of course. So, it was somewhat zombie like that Muriel rinsed off the dishes and left them in the sink, then took to her recliner. The questions were still up on the screen, so she blanked that and called up the entertainment menu. Right off the bat she noticed a difference. There was now an 'adult' category. A nudge from her soul had her examining it. And some time later, she realized that she'd gotten an education. And so had her soul.

She also realized that she was tired. Exhausted. And she couldn't figure out why. She hadn't really done much, today, and her power wasn't down. A glance at the clock gave her an indication. It was well beyond the usual time she went to bed, so she tabled any further research and decided that sleep was the best thing to do, now.

It was a soft clink of a dish that she first heard the next morning. Careful to be sure she was dressed before she got rid of the privacy curtain, she got up and headed for the kitchen. Chuck was just finishing putting her breakfast out. He was gone when she got out of the bathroom and sat down to eat. And, at least this time she knew what she was eating. When she'd finished, she decided that Chuck and company had done enough dishes for a while, and did her own, using the method her parents had come up with and smiling at the thought that they were the ones who had started the craze to come up with common uses of training.

Translating to her desk, she noticed that Mata was looking at her in a funny way. "What? I miss a day or something?" she asked.

"Well, actually, I wasn't expecting to see you today," Mata replied.

"Am I interrupting something?" asked Muriel.

"Nope. Nothing to interrupt," Mata replied, coming in and sitting on the opposite side of the desk. "To tell you the truth, I wasn't sure what I was expecting. Just that it wasn't you calmly coming into the office like nothing happened."

"Well, really nothing DID happen. Oh, I got an education all right. But that doesn't stop me from wanting to know where things stand in the world," Muriel said. "We haven't gotten any paperwork from Alice on that bunch that tried to take over Enclave, have we?"

"Nope. Well, she did say it would probably take a week," Mata said. "You're running on idle, letting your mind and soul catch up with each other, aren't you?" she added, like a statement.

"Yep. Kinda. It's like there's three of me, and two of them are busy, right now. Leaving me with nothing to do," Muriel said.

"So? Why don't you go do something, then. Take a walk. Make a statue. Read a book. Or something," Mata said. "It's Sunday. You deserve a break away from the place. Go visiting."

Muriel thought for a moment, then changed into jeans and a white blouse – reminiscent of the outfit she wore the first day she came to Enclave – and translated out . . . to Britain's Enclave. More precisely, to the entrance to the parking lot. Then walked in. Nobody stopped her, or asked for a ticket or the price of admission. She couldn't figure out why, until she realized that the ticket takers and such were either Envoys or trained, and could see her stripes.

She did get a lot of looks, especially from children. Kids flocked around her, dragging their parents along with them. Envoys and troops nodded and waved as she went by, headed toward Taylor's office. Well, so much for being incognito. So she switched to her more familiar uniform, and she could swear she could hear the kids sigh.

As she entered his office, Taylor said, "All you needed were palm fronds and an ass."

"Oh, please. I know the reference you're making. And fortunately, palms don't grow here," she said. "And as for the ass, that's what I'm here to find out about. We need to talk."

"Oh, oh. What did I do know?" he asked.

"It's not what you did," Muriel replied. "It's more what you're going to do. Taylor . . . are you my friend? And do you feel that I'm YOUR friend?"

"Oh. That again. Muriel . . .," he started, then stopped. Muriel took one of the chairs on the other side of his desk and waited. "Muriel, I feel that you are a friend to me. But I don't know if I constitute a friend to you. You're stronger than I am. You're able to shift gears with surprising speed, and I really don't know how you do it. I'm pretty fair at tactics and strategy. But you go so far beyond that that it's scary. And sometimes you're tough on me, and other times you're soft and affectionate. And . . . and sometimes I feel that there isn't anything that I can do for you . . . to care for you. You're so self-confident. I'm afraid that I make a pretty poor friend to you."

"That was pretty good. You've been thinking about this."

"Yea," he said. "And I've made a start, of sorts. I DID get in deeper with my soul, and am trying to watch the balance more. But it's taking time."

"OK, I don't think you ever got the Ambassador's course that Betty came up with. I'd like to give you that, and have you just pass it to your soul. It'll sort itself out," and she matched actions to words. "Now, there's one more thing I'd like to do. That is, if you agree. I'd like to make a two way deep link with you. It might answer some of your questions. I DON'T want you to become a copy of me. That wouldn't be good for either of us. And I'll be honest, it scares me to open up that much. But I think it would help you to understand how I think, and why I can seem to shift gears so fast. If you're willing," she said in a tentative voice.

Instead of answering verbally, he just came around the desk and sat next to her. Then opened up as wide as he knew how, only to meet another mind just as open as his. It was long moments of just looking at each other, then they drew back slightly.

"WHOA. OK, I can see why people don't do that very often. That's intense," he said.

"Do we need to damp it down, more?" she asked.

"No. I don't think so," he said. "It'll just take me a bit to adjust. And yea, now I see how you do it. A lot of what you do is just reaction. Finely tuned reaction. And now I understand the confusion that night you saved my grandmother. And you don't check the balance for everything. Only those things you have time for – where you not operating on instinct. And you're deeper linked to your soul than I am. And to . . . Mata?"

“Yea. It gives me some stability, as well as gives me answers to questions I sometimes don't even know I have. But mostly, she's my 'checks and balances' on snap decisions. She's overruled me on occasion,” Muriel said. “Oh, not that it would look like it. But when she raises a question concerning a decision, I listen.”

“I see that. And a lot more. And I still can't see what I can offer you,” he said.

“Companionship. Friendship. Someone I can go to when I'm feeling down, or confused, or . . . well, anything,” she said. “Someone I can depend on.”

“That's not much.”

“Sometimes, it's enough,” she said standing up. And, as he stood, too, she kissed him. And there was a cheer and applause from outside. “Oh, dear. I think we had an audience.”

“I know we did. Well . . . THIS will be all over Britain by tonight. Looks like the future is going to be . . . uh . . . 'interesting'.”

“Oh, yea,” she replied.



Meet the Author

Craig A. Eddy

I'm 67, retired and proud of it. I live in a science fiction world. When I was 14, I wanted a computer that would do the things the room sized ones could do, but would fit in a briefcase. I was thinking small. What I ended up with a few years later was one that could do those things and fit in my shirt pocket. And it's just gotten better. I've been a CAD operator (18 1/2 years) and a number of other things in my life, and now I write fantasy novels for my own amusement using a computer with no paid software on it. All free. Even the operating system (Linux).

Currently writing Fantasy books that are available as PDF files under Creative Commons License.

Bragging rights:

I have a Bachelor of Arts degree in Philosophy a B.A. in BS